HARDING OF ALLENWOOD

HAROLD BINDLOSS

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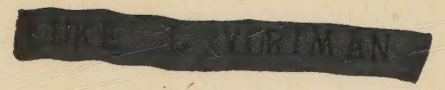

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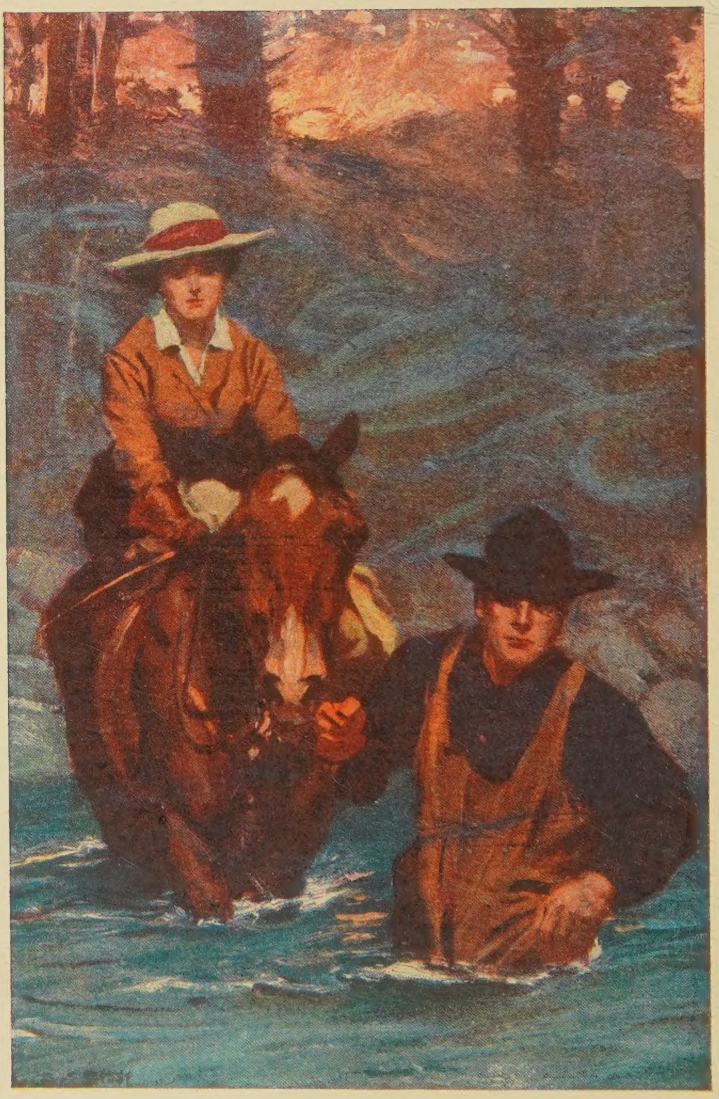

"'PICK UP YOUR SKIRT,' HE SAID BLUNTLY; 'IT GETS STEEPER.'"—
Page 32

HARDING OF ALLENWOOD

BY

HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF
PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN,
WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE, ETC

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR

GROSSET & DUNLAP
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HARDING OF ALLENWOOD

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CHAPTER I

THE PIONEERS

IT was a clear day in September. The boisterous winds which had swept the wide Canadian plain all summer had fallen and only a faint breeze stirred the yellowing leaves of the poplars. Against the glaring blue of the northern sky the edge of the prairie cut in a long, straight line; above the southern horizon rounded cloud-masses hung, soft and white as wool. Far off, the prairie was washed with tints of delicate gray, but as it swept in to the foreground the color changed, growing in strength, to brown and ocher with streaks of silvery brightness where the withered grass caught the light. To the east the view was broken, for the banks of a creek that wound across the broad level were lined with timber — birches and poplars growing tall in the shelter of the ravine and straggling along its crest. Their pale-colored branches glowed among the early autumn leaves.

In a gap between the trees two men stood resting on their axes, and rows of logs and branches and piles of chips were scattered about the clearing. The men

were dressed much alike, in shirts that had once been blue but were now faded to an indefinite color, old brown overalls, and soft felt hats that had fallen out of shape. Their arms were bare to the elbows, the low shirt-collars left their necks exposed, showing skin that had weathered, like their clothing, to the color of the soil. Standing still, they were scarcely distinguishable from their surroundings.

Harding was thirty years old, and tall and strongly built. He looked virile and athletic, but his figure was marked by signs of strength rather than grace. His forehead was broad, his eyes between blue and gray, and his gaze gravely steady. He had a straight nose and a firm mouth; and although there was more than a hint of determination in his expression, it indicated, on the whole, a pleasant, even a magnetic, disposition.

Devine was five years younger and of lighter build. He was the handsomer of the two, but he lacked that indefinite something about his companion which attracted more attention.

"Let's quit a few minutes for a smoke," suggested Devine, dropping his ax. "We've worked pretty hard since noon."

He sat down on a log and took out an old corncob pipe. When it was filled and lighted he leaned back contentedly against a friendly stump.

Harding remained standing, his hand on the long ax-haft, his chin slightly lifted, and his eyes fixed on the empty plain. Between him and the horizon there was no sign of life except that a flock of migrating birds were moving south across the sky in a drawn-out wedge. The wide expanse formed part of what was then the territory of Assiniboia, and is now the prov-

ince of Saskatchewan. As far as one could see, the soil was thin alluvial loam, interspersed with the stiff "gumbo" that grows the finest wheat; but the plow had not yet broken its surface. Small towns were springing up along the railroad track, but the great plain between the Saskatchewan and the Assiniboine was, for the most part, still a waste, waiting for the tide of population that had begun to flow.

Harding was a born pioneer, and his expression grew intent as he gazed across the wilderness.

"What will this prairie be like, Fred, when those poplars are tall enough to cut?" he said gravely, indicating some saplings beside him. "There's going to be a big change here."

"That's true; and it's just what I'm counting on. That's what made me leave old Dakota. I want to be in on the ground-floor!"

Harding knit his brows, and his face had a concentrated look. He was not given to talking at large, but he had a gift of half-instinctive prevision as well as practical, constructive ability, and just then he felt strangely moved. It seemed to him that he heard in the distance the march of a great army of new home-builders, moving forward slowly and cautiously as yet. He was one of the advance skirmishers, though the first scouts had already pushed on and vanished across the skyline into the virgin West.

"Well," he said, "think what's happening! Ontario's settled and busy with manufactures; Manitoba and the Dakotas, except for the sand-belts, are filling up. The older States are crowded, and somebody owns all the soil that's worth working in the Middle West. England and Germany are overflowing, and

we have roughly seven hundred miles of country here that needs people. They must come. The pressure behind will force them."

"But think what that will mean to the price of wheat! It's bringing only a dollar and a half now. We can't raise it at a dollar."

"It will break the careless," Harding said, "but dollar wheat will come. The branch railroads will follow the homesteads; you'll see the elevators dotting the prairie, and when we've opened up this great table-land between the American border and the frozen line, the wheat will pour into every settlement faster than the cars can haul it out. Prices will fall until every slack farmer has mortgaged all he owns."

"Then what good will it do? If the result is to be only mortgages?"

"Oh, but I said every *slack* farmer. It will clear out the incompetent, improve our methods. The ox-team and the grass trail will have to go. We'll have steam gang-plows and graded roads. We'll have better machines all round."

"And afterward?"

Harding's eyes sparkled.

"Afterward? Then the men with brains and grit who have held on — the fittest, who have survived — will come into such prosperity as few farmers have ever had. America, with her population leaping up, will have less and less wheat to ship; England will steadily call for more; we'll have wheat at a price that will pay us well before we're through. Then there'll be no more dug-outs and log-shacks, but fine brick homesteads, with all the farms fenced and mechanical

transport on the roads. It's coming, Fred! Those who live through the struggle will certainly see it."

Harding laughed and lifted his ax.

"But enough of that! If we're to get our homesteads up before the frost comes, we'll have to hustle."

The big ax flashed in the sunshine and bit deep into a poplar trunk; but when a few more logs had been laid beside the rest the men stopped again, for they heard a beat of hoofs coming toward them across the prairie. The trees cut off their view of the rider, but when he rounded a corner of the bluff and pulled up his horse, they saw a young lad, picturesquely dressed in a deerskin jacket of Indian make, decorated with fringed hide and embroidery, cord riding-breeches, and polished leggings. His slouch hat was pushed back on his head, showing a handsome face that had in it a touch of imperiousness.

"Hello!" he said, with a look of somewhat indignant surprise. "What are you fellows doing here?"

Harding felt amused at the tone of superiority in the youngster's voice; yet he had a curious, half-conscious feeling that there was something he recognized about the boy. It was not that he had met him before, but that well-bred air and the clean English intonation were somehow familiar.

"If you look around you," Harding smiled, "you might be able to guess that we're cutting down trees."

The boy gave an imperious toss of his head.

"What I meant was that you have no right on this property."

"No?"

"It belongs to us. And logs large enough for build-

ing are scarce enough already. As a matter of fact, we're not allowed to cut these ourselves without the Colonel's permission."

"Haven't met him yet," said Devine dryly. "Who's he?"

"Colonel Mowbray, of Allenwood Grange."

"And who's Colonel Mowbray? And where's Allenwood Grange?"

The boy seemed nettled by the twinkle in Devine's eyes, but Harding noticed that pride compelled him to hide his feelings.

"You can't cut this lumber without asking leave! Besides, you're spoiling one of our best coyote covers."

"Kyotes!" exclaimed Devine. "What do you do with 'em?"

The youngster stared at him a moment in disdain.

"We have a pack of hounds at the Grange," he then condescended to answer.

"Hunt them! Well, now, that's mighty strange. I'd have thought you'd find arsenic cheaper. Then if you were to lie out round the chicken-house with a gun ——"

The boy cut him short.

"If you want these logs, you must ask for them. Shall I tell the Colonel you are coming to do so?"

"Well, sonny," drawled Devine, "you just run along home and send somebody grown-up. We might talk to him."

"As it happens," the boy said with great dignity, "Kenwyne is in the bluff. I must warn you not to touch a tree until you see him."

Without another word he turned and rode off.

During the conversation Harding had been studying him closely. The well-bred reserve in his manner, which, while peremptory, was somehow free from arrogance, compelled the man's admiration.

"From the Old Country," he said with a laugh, "and a bit high-handed, but there's sand in him. Do you know anything about Allenwood?"

"Not much, but I heard the boys talking about it at the railroad store. It's a settlement of high-toned Britishers with more money than sense. They play at farming and ride round the country on pedigree horses."

"The horse the boy rode was certainly a looker!" Harding commented, swinging his ax once more.

As it sliced out a chip with a ringing thud, and another, and yet another, the boy returned, accompanied by a well-mounted older man with a sallow face and very dark eyes and a languidly graceful air. The man was plainly dressed but he wore the stamp Harding had noticed on the youngster; and again there flashed through Harding's mind the half-indistinct thought that these people were familiar to him.

"I understand that you insist upon cutting this timber," Kenwyne began.

"Yes," Harding replied. "And I was surprised when your friend here said it belonged to Colonel Mowbray."

"He went too far, but it does belong to him in a sense. The Colonel founded the settlement when very few other people thought of leaving Manitoba, and he had the usual option of cutting all the wood he wanted on unoccupied land. We have always got it here, and

as we have done all the road-making and general improvements in the neighborhood, we have come to look upon it as our own."

"Is that your bridge across the creek?"

"Yes; and it's not a bad job, I think. We had a good deal of trouble digging out the grade in the ravine."

"Well, interfering with bridges is not a habit of mine; so we'll let your trail stand. But I could make you divert it to the proper road reserve."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kenwyne. "That sounds significant."

"Precisely. This bluff and the section it stands on belong to me; the transfer was registered at the land office a week ago."

"Then I think there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh," Harding responded with a smile, "you might tell your Colonel that when he wants any lumber he may cut it if he'll let me know!"

Kenwyne laughed.

"Thanks!" he said. "It's a generous offer, but I can't promise that Colonel Mowbray will avail himself of your permission. I wish you good afternoon."

He rode away with his companion, and an hour later Harding and Devine threw their axes on their shoulders and struck out across the prairie. The sun had dipped, the air was getting cool, and on the clean-cut western horizon a soft red flush faded beneath a band of vivid green.

At the foot of a low rise the men stopped.

"I'll be around the first thing in the morning," Devine said.

"Then you're not coming to supper?"

"No," Devine answered reluctantly; "I guess not. I've been over twice this week, and Hester has enough to do without extra cooking for me."

"As you wish," said Harding, and they separated in a friendly manner.

When he was alone Harding went on briskly, walking with an elastic step and looking far ahead across the shadowy plain. It was a rich land that stretched away before him, and a compact block of it belonged to him. It was virgin soil, his to do with as he liked. He thought that he could make good use of it; but he had no illusions; he knew all about prairie farming, and was prepared for a hard struggle.

Crossing the rise, he headed for a glow of light that flickered in the gloom of a small birch bluff, and presently stopped at a tent pitched among the trees. Two big red oxen were grazing by the edge of the bluff, a row of birch logs lay among the grass beside a pile of ship-lap boards, and some more of the boards had been roughly built into a pointed shack. In front of this a young girl bent over a fire that burned between two logs. All round, except where the wood broke the view, the wilderness rolled away, dim and silent.

Hester Harding looked up with a smile when her brother stopped. She resembled him, for she had his direct, thoughtful glance and fine proportions. Her face and hands were browned by sun and wind, but, although she had worked hard from childhood, she wore no coarsening stamp of toil. Her features were good, and the plain print dress she had made in her scanty spare time became her.

"Tired, Craig?" she asked in a pleasant voice.

"Not quite as fresh as I was at sun-up," Harding

smiled. "We got through a good deal of work today and I'll soon be able to make a start with the house. We'll have to rush the framing to get finished before the frost."

While they ate their simple supper they talked about his building plans, and he answered her questions carefully; for Hester had keen intelligence, and had shared his work and ambitions for the past few years. For the most part, their life had been hard and frugal. Until Craig reached the age of eighteen, he had helped his father to cultivate his patch of wheat-soil in an arid belt of North Dakota. Then the father had died, leaving about a thousand dollars besides his land and teams, and the lad had courageously taken up the task of supporting his mother and sister. Two years afterward, Mrs. Harding died, and Craig, at the age of twenty, set himself to consider the future.

During his management of the farm he had made more money than his father had ever made, but the land was poor and incapable of much improvement. On the other hand, Dakota was getting settled and homesteads were becoming valuable, and Craig determined to sell out and invest the money in a larger holding in a thinly populated part of Manitoba. Hester went with him to Canada; and when the advancing tide of settlement reached their new home, Craig sold out again, getting much more than he had paid for his land, and moved west ahead of the army of prairie-breakers which he knew would presently follow him. It was a simple plan, but it needed courage and resourcefulness. He spoke of it to Hester when he lighted his pipe after the meal.

"It was a notion of Father's that one should try

to anticipate a big general movement," he remarked. "'Keep a little in front; the pioneers get the pickings,' he once told me. 'If you follow the main body, you'll find the land swept bare.' He had a way of saying things like that; I learned a good deal from him."

"He knew a good deal," said Hester thoughtfully. "He was more clever than you are, Craig, but he hadn't your habit of putting his ideas into practise. I've sometimes thought he must have lost heart after some big trouble long ago, and only made an effort now and then for Mother's sake. It's strange that we know nothing about him except that he came from the Old Country."

Craig had often wondered about his father, for the man had been somewhat of an enigma to him. Basil Harding had lived like his neighbors, who were plain tillers of the soil, and he never spoke of his English origin, but now and then he showed a breadth of thought and refinement of manner that were not in keeping with his environment. Mrs. Harding was the daughter of a Michigan farmer, a shrewd but gentle woman of practical turn of mind.

"I wonder," Craig said, "how much Mother knew?"

"She must have known something. Once or twice, near the end, I think she meant to tell us, for there was something troubling her, but the last stroke came so suddenly, and she never spoke." Hester paused, as if lost in painful memories, and then went on: "It was very strange about that money you got."

Craig nodded. When he was twenty-one a Winnipeg lawyer had turned over to him five thousand dollars on condition that he remain in Canada, and make

no attempt to communicate with his father's relatives.

"Yes," he said. "And something happened this afternoon that puzzled me."

He told Hester about his meeting with the men from Allenwood.

"The curious thing about it," he added, "is that as I watched the boy sitting on his fine blooded horse and heard him speak, I felt as if I'd once lived among high-toned English people and could somehow understand what he was thinking. But of course I never had a horse like his, and we were born in a rough shack on a poor Dakota farm. Can one inherit one's ancestors' feelings and memories?"

"It's very strange," mused Hester.

Harding laughed.

"Well, anyway, I'm a farmer," he said. "I stand upon my own feet — regardless of ancestors. What I am is what I make of myself!"

He moved off toward the tent.

"It's getting late," he called back to her.

But for a long time Hester sat beside the sinking fire. Her brother, whom she loved and admired, differed slightly, but noticeably in one or two respects, from any of the prairie farmers she had known. Though it was hard to procure books, he had read widely and about other subjects than agriculture. Odd tricks of thought and speech also suggested the difference; but she knew that nobody else except her mother had noticed it, for, to all intents, Craig was merely a shrewd, hard-working grower of wheat.

Then the girl's face grew gentle as she thought of Fred Devine. He had proved very constant and had several times made what was then a long and adven-

turous journey to see her. Now, when his father had given him a few hundred dollars, he had followed Craig, and she was ready to marry him as soon as he could make a home for her. At present he was living in a dug-out in a bank, and must harvest his first crop before he could think about a house.

When the fire had died down to a few smoldering coals, Hester got up and looked about her. The moon hung, large and red, above the prairie's rim; the air was sharp and wonderfully exhilarating. Behind the tent the birch leaves rustled softly in the bluff, and in the distance a coyote howled. There was no other sound; it was all very still and strangely lonely; but the girl felt no shrinking. On her mother's side she sprang from a race of pioneers, and her true work was to help in the breaking of the wilderness.

CHAPTER II

PORTENTS OF CHANGE

THE moon was above the horizon when Kenwyne pulled up his horse to a walk opposite Allenwood Grange. The view from this point always appealed to the artist in Kenwyne. The level plain was broken here by steep, sandy rises crowned with jack-pines and clumps of poplar, and a shallow lake reached out into the open from their feet. A short distance back from its shore, the Grange stood on a gentle slope, with a grove of birches that hid the stables and outbuildings straggling up the hill behind.

As Kenwyne saw it in the moonlight across the glittering water, the house was picturesque. In the center rose a square, unpretentious building of notched logs; but from this ship-lap additions, showing architectural taste, stretched out in many wings, so that, from a distance, the homestead with its wooded background had something of the look of an old English manor house. It was this which made the colonists of Allenwood regard it with affection. Now it was well lighted, and the yellow glow from its windows shone cheerfully across the lake.

The foundations of the place had been laid in unsettled times, after the Hudson Bay fur-traders had relinquished their control of the trackless West, but before the Dominion Government had established its

authority. The farmers were then spreading cautiously across the Manitoban plain, in some fear of the Metis half-breeds, and it was considered a bold adventure when the builder of the Grange pushed far out into the prairies of the Assiniboine. He had his troubles, but he made his holding good, and sold it to Colonel Mowbray, who founded the Allenwood settlement.

On the whole, the colony had succeeded, but Kenwyne saw that it might become an anachorism in changing times. He had noted the advance of the hard-bitten homesteaders who were settling wherever the soil was good, and who were marked by sternly utilitarian methods and democratic ideas. Before long Allenwood must cast off its aristocratic traditions and compete with these newcomers; but Kenwyne feared that its founder was not the man to change.

As he rode slowly past the lake, a man came toward him with a gun and a brace of prairie-chickens.

"Hello, Ralph!" he said. "Have you forgotten that it's council night?"

"I'm not likely to forget after the rebuke I got for missing the last meeting," Kenwyne replied. "Do you happen to know what kind of temper the Colonel is in, Broadwood?"

"My opinion is that it might be better. Gerald Mowbray has turned up again, and I've noticed that the old man is less serene than usual when his son's about. In fact, as we have to bear the consequences, I wish the fellow would stay away."

While Broadwood and Kenwyne were discussing him on the hillside, Colonel Mowbray sat in his study at the Grange, talking to the elder of his two sons.

The room was small and plainly furnished, with a map of the territory on the matchboarded wall, a plain table on which lay a few bundles of neatly docketed papers, and a stove in one corner. Account-books filled a shelf, and beneath there was a row of pigeon-holes. The room had an air of austere simplicity with which Colonel Mowbray's appearance harmonized.

He was tall, but spare of flesh, with an erect carriage and an autocratic expression. His hair was gray, his eyes were dark and keen, and his mouth was unusually firm; but the hollowness of his face and the lines on his forehead showed advancing age. He was a man of some ability, with simple tastes, certain unchangeable convictions, and a fiery temper. Leaving the army with a grievance which he never spoke about, and being of too restless a character to stay at home, he had founded Allenwood for the purpose of settling young Englishmen upon the land. He demanded that they be well born, have means enough to make a fair start, and that their character should bear strict investigation. Though the two latter conditions were not invariably complied with, his scheme had prospered. Mowbray was generous, and had taken the sons of several old friends who did not possess the capital required; while the discipline he enforced had curbed the wayward. For the most part, the settlers regarded him with affection as well as respect; but he had failed most signally with his own son, who now stood rather awkwardly before him.

After serving for a year or two in India as an engineer lieutenant, Gerald Mowbray met with an accident which forced him to leave the army. He made an unsuccessful start on another career, and had of

late been engaged upon a Government survey of the rugged forest-belt which runs west to the confines of the Manitoban plain. He was a handsome, dark-complexioned man, but looked slacker and less capable than his father.

"I think five hundred pounds would clear me," he said in an apologetic tone. "If I could pay off these fellows, it would be a great relief, and I'd faithfully promise to keep clear of debt in future."

"It seems to me I've heard something of the kind on previous occasions," Mowbray returned dryly. "There's a weak strain in you, Gerald, though I don't know where you got it. I suppose a thousand pounds would be better?"

Gerald's eyes grew eager; but the next moment his face fell, for he knew his father's methods, and saw his ironical smile.

"Well," he said cautiously, "I could straighten things out if I had five hundred."

"With what you got from your mother!"

Gerald winced. His mother never refused him, even though he knew that it often meant sacrifice on her part.

"To save our name," Mowbray said sternly, "and for that reason only, I am going to let you have three hundred pounds. But I warn you, it's the last you'll get. You may as well know that it is hard to spare this."

Gerald looked his surprise.

"I thought ——"

Mowbray interrupted him.

"My affairs are not so prosperous as they seem; but I rely on you not to mention the fact. Now you

may go. But, remember — there's to be no more money thrown away!"

When Gerald closed the door, Mowbray took down one of his account-books, and sat still for a long time studying it. He had never been rich, but he had had enough, and as the settlement grew up he had felt justified in selling to newcomers, at moderate prices, land which he had got as a free grant. Now, however, the land was nearly all taken up. For a time he bred cattle, but this had scarcely paid; then the development of the milling industry and the building of elevators rendered wheat-growing possible, and though the grain had to be hauled a long way, Mowbray made a small profit. Prices, however, were falling, and land nearer the railroad was coming into cultivation.

With a gloomy air, Mowbray closed the book and went down to preside over the council which was held periodically and, as a rule, ended in an evening of social amusement.

The hall was large and square, with matchboarded walls and a pointed roof. In an open hearth a log fire burned cheerily, although two large windows were opened wide to let in the September air. Bunches of wheat and oats of unusual growth hung upon the walls, suggesting the settlers' occupation; but it was significant that the grain was surmounted by a row of the heads of prairie antelope, as well as moose and caribou from the North. They were farmers at Allenwood, but they were sportsmen first.

About a dozen men were sitting round a table when Mowbray entered, but they rose and waited until he took his place. They varied in age from twenty to forty, and in their easy manners and natural grace one

recognized the stamp of birth. Evening dress was not the rule at Allenwood, and while some wore white shirts and city clothes, others were attired picturesquely in red-laced blue vests and fringed deerskin. Their brown faces and athletic figures indicated a healthy life in the open, but they had too gallant and careless an air for toilers.

A few suggestions for the improvement of the trails were made and discussed; and then Mowbray turned to Kenwyne, who had spent the afternoon looking for suitable logs for the bridge-stringers.

"Did you and Lance find anything?" Mowbray asked.

Kenwyne was waiting for this opening to make what he felt was an important announcement.

"We went to the bluff," he said. "What we found was two homesteaders cutting down all the best trees."

"Homesteaders!"

Mowbray frowned and the others looked interested.

"You warned them off, of course!"

"Lance did. But one of the fellows retorted that the timber was his."

"Impossible!" Mowbray said sharply. "The nearest preemption is six miles off — and that's too close!"

"It appears that the man has just bought the section on our western range-line. He referred me to the land register, if I had any doubt. I'm afraid you must take it for granted, sir, that we are going to have neighbors."

"Never!" Mowbray brought his fist down on the table with a resounding blow. "We may not be able to turn out these intruders, but I decline to consider them neighbors of ours." He turned to the others.

"You must see that this is disturbing news. We came here to live in accordance with the best English traditions, and although we had to put up with some hardships, there were compensations — abundant sport, space, and freedom. In a sense, the country was ours, with its wood and water, as far as we cared to ride. Now every homestead that is built restricts what we have regarded, with some justice, as our rights. We took heavy risks in settling here when people believed it was economically impossible to farm at Allenwood."

There was a murmur of approval.

"These fellows will put an end to our running range horses and cattle," one man said. "If many of them come into the district, we may have to put down the coyote hounds, and ask permission before we course a jack-rabbit. Then they could make us divert our trails to the road reserves."

"Something of that kind may happen," Kenwyne interposed. "But the fellow I met seemed inclined to be friendly. Said he'd let our trail stand and we might cut what wood we wanted, provided we get his permission."

Mowbray drew himself up haughtily.

"Although you recognize the lesser drawbacks," he said, "I'm afraid you miss the most important point. I must remind you that this settlement was founded to enable a certain stamp of Englishmen to enjoy a life that was becoming more difficult without large means at home. A man with simple tastes could find healthy occupation out of doors, keep a good horse, and get as much shooting as he wanted. So long as his farming covered, or nearly covered, his expenses,

that was all that was required. We have not discouraged the making of money, but I must frankly say that this was not our object. Now I see threats of change. We may be brought into contact, and perhaps into opposition, with men whose motives are different. Their coming here has to me a sinister meaning."

"Allenwood has been a success," said Broadwood; "one can't deny it — but I think we owe a good deal to our having settled in a new and undeveloped country. The experiment turned out well because we got the land cheap and wheat was dear. Now I foresee a sharp fall in prices, and it seems to me that we may have to revise our methods to suit the times. In future, we may find it difficult to live upon our farms unless we work them properly. I'm afraid we can't stand still while Canada moves on — and I'm not sure that it's a great misfortune."

"Do you admire modern methods?" somebody asked. "If you do, you'd better study what things are coming to in America and England. There is not a hired man at Allenwood who is not on first-rate terms with his master; do you want to under-pay and over-drive them or, on the other hand, to have them making impossible demands, and playing the mischief by a harvest strike? I agree with our respected leader that we don't want to change."

"But tell us about these intruders," Mowbray said to Kenwyne. "What sort of men are they?"

"Well, first of all, they're workers; there's no mistaking that. And I'd judge that they came from the States — Dakota, perhaps."

"That is to say, they're hustlers!" a lad broke in. "Couldn't we buy them out before they get started, sir?"

"It would cost us something to buy a section, and we would have to work part of it to pay the new taxes. Then the fellows would probably find out that it was an easy way of getting a good price; and we couldn't keep on buying them out. We have all the land we want, and must be careful whom we allow to join us."

"I think we should try to keep an open mind," Kenwyne suggested. "It might pay us to watch the men and see what they can teach us. Sooner or later we shall have to improve our farming, and we may as well begin it gradually. After all, it's something to gather two bushels of wheat where only one grew."

Mowbray looked at him sternly.

"I'm sorry to see you and Broadwood taking this line, Ralph; but I've long suspected that your views were not quite sound. Frankly, I'm afraid of the thin end of the wedge." He turned to the others. "You will understand that there can be no compromise. We shall continue to live as English gentlemen and have nothing to do with the grasping commercialism that is getting a dangerous hold on the older countries. I will do my best to keep Allenwood free from it while I have the power."

"Whatever my private opinions are, I think you know you can rely on my loyal support in all you do for the good of the settlement, sir," Kenwyne replied. "Now that we have the matter before us, it might be well if you told us how we are to treat these Americans. We're bound to meet them."

"I cannot suggest discourtesy, since it would be

foreign to your character and against our traditions; but I do not wish you to become intimate with them."

When the meeting broke up an hour later, Broadwood walked home with Kenwyne. It was a small and unpretentious house that perched on the hillside beyond the lake, but the room the men entered was comfortably furnished. A few photographs of officers in uniform, the football team of a famous public school, and the crew of an Oxford racing boat, hung on the pine-board walls.

"We must have a talk," said Kenwyne. "I feel that these fellows' settling here is important; it's bound to make a difference. I know the type; one can't ignore them. They'll have to be reckoned with, as friends or enemies."

"In spite of the Colonel's opinion, I believe their influence will be for good. What Allenwood needs most is waking up." Broadwood laughed. "It's curious that we should agree on this. Of course, my marriage is supposed to account for my perversion; but one can understand Mowbray's painful surprise at you. Your views ought to be sound."

"What *is* a sound view?"

"At Allenwood, it's a view that agrees with Mowbray's."

"Let's be serious," Kenwyne replied. "There's something to be said for his contention, after all. We have got along pretty well so far."

"Yes; but the settlement has never been self-supporting. Mowbray got the land for nothing and sold it in parcels, as he was entitled to do, spending part of the price on improvements from which we all benefit. Then a number of the boys got drafts from home when

they lost a crop. We have been living on capital instead of on revenue; but the time is coming when this must stop. Our people at home can't keep on financing us, and the land is nearly all taken up."

"Well, what follows?"

"Allenwood will shortly have to earn its living," Broadwood answered, laughing. "This will be a shock to some of our friends, but even with wheat going down the thing shouldn't prove insuperably difficult."

"We may have wheat at less than a dollar. Look at the quantity of good land that's available, and the character of the men who're coming in. They'll live on revenue, in dug-outs and fifty-dollar shacks, and all they don't spend on food will go into new teams and implements. They don't expect an easy time, and won't get it, but we'll have to meet their competition. Personally, I don't think that's impossible. I believe we're their equals in brain and muscle."

"We used to think we were superior," Broadwood smiled. "Our conservative sentiments will be our greatest difficulty."

"I'm afraid we'll have to get rid of them."

"Mowbray will never throw his traditions overboard."

"No. I see trouble ahead," said Kenwyne.

"It's an awkward situation, I'll admit. Instead of Mowbray's leading us, we'll have to carry him along, so to speak, without his knowing it. As he's not a fool, the thing may need more tact than we're capable of. For all that, he must remain leader."

"Of course," said Kenwyne simply. "He made Allenwood. We must stick to him."

Long after Broadwood had gone, Kenwyne stood at the door of his house, looking out over the lake. There was no wind, and the prairie was very silent. Stretching back in the moonlight to the horizon, its loneliness was impressive; but Kenwyne was not deceived. He knew that the tide of population and progress had already passed its boundaries and was flowing fast up every channel, following the railroad, the rivers, and the fur-traders' trails. It would wash away the old landmarks and undermine every barrier that Mowbray could raise. Kenwyne wondered what would happen when Allenwood was surrounded by the flood. After all, it depended upon the settlers whether the inundation proved destructive or fertilizing.

CHAPTER III

AT THE FORD

A FEW days after the council, Beatrice, Colonel Mowbray's only daughter, sat talking with her mother in the drawing-room at the Grange. Beatrice had returned on the previous evening from a visit to England, and it struck her, perhaps by contrast with the homes of her mother's friends, that the room had a dingy, cheerless look. The few pieces of good furniture which Mowbray had brought with him had suffered during transport and showed signs of age; the others, sent out from Toronto, were crudely new. Rugs and curtains were faded, and there were places that had been carefully mended. The matchboarded walls looked very bare. More than all, it struck the girl that her mother seemed listless and worn.

Mrs. Mowbray was a gentle, reserved woman. She was still beautiful, but the years she had spent upon the prairie had left their mark on her. She had lost her former vivacity and something of her independence of thought; and, except to those who knew her well, her character seemed colorless. Mowbray was considerate of his wife, but there was no room under his roof for two directing wills or more than one set of opinions. For all that, Mrs. Mowbray wore an air of quiet dignity.

Beatrice had a trace of her father's imperious tem-

per. She looked very fresh, for a life spent largely out of doors had given her a vigorous, graceful carriage as well as a fine, warm color, and had set a sparkle in her deep-blue eyes. There was a hint of determination about her mouth, and her glance was often proud. She was just twenty-two, and the fashionable English dress set off her gracefully outlined and rather slender figure.

As she looked at her mother her face grew thoughtful.

"You are not looking well, Mother dear," she said.

"I am not ill," Mrs. Mowbray answered in a tired voice. "It has been a very hot and trying summer, and the crop was poor. That had its effect upon your father. Then you have heard that Gerald ——"

There was a quick, indignant flash in Beatrice's eyes.

"Yes, I know! Of course, I stand up for him to outsiders, but I'm getting ashamed of Gerald. His debts must have been a heavy tax on Father. I think that too much has been done for the boys. I have nothing to complain of; but we're not rich, and I'm afraid you have had to suffer."

"My dear, you mustn't question your father's judgment."

Beatrice smiled.

"I suppose not, and my criticism would certainly be wasted; still, you can't expect me to have your patience."

She went to one of the long windows in the drawing-room and threw it open wide.

"How I love the prairie!" she exclaimed, looking out over the vast plain that stretched away to a sky all rose and purple and gold.

A tired smile crept into her mother's face.

"It has its charm," she said; "but, after all, you have been away at school, and have not seen much of it. One has to do without so much here, and when you have gone through an unvarying round of duties day after day for years, seeing only the same few people and hearing the same opinions, you find it dreary. One longs to meet clever strangers and feel the stir and bustle of life now and then; but instead there comes another care or a fresh responsibility. You don't realize yet what a bad harvest or a fall in the wheat market means; for, while the men have their troubles, in a settlement like Allenwood, the heaviest burden falls upon the women."

"You must have had to give up a good deal to come here," Beatrice said.

"I loved your father, and I knew that he could not be happy in England," was the simple answer.

Beatrice was silent for a few moments. It was the first time she had understood the sacrifice her mother had made, and she was moved to sympathy. Then, in the flighty manner of youth, she changed the subject.

"Oh, I must tell you about dear Mr. Morel!" Catching an alert look in her mother's eyes, Beatrice laughed. Then, with a quick, impulsive movement, she crossed the floor, took her mother's face between both her hands, and kissed it. "No," she answered the question that had not been spoken; "Mr. Morel is a lovely old man who lives all alone, with just his servants, at Ash Garth, in a fine old house full of art treasures that seem to have been collected from all over the world. And there's a rose garden between

the lawn and the river, and a big woods all round. Mr. Morel is charming, and he was particularly kind to me, because he and Uncle Gordon are such great friends."

"Did you see much of him?"

"Oh, yes; and I like him. But, Mother," Beatrice lowered her voice dramatically, "there's a mystery in his life. I'm sure of it! I asked Uncle Gordon; but if he knew he wouldn't tell. Then I tried to question Mr. Morel ——"

"Why, Beatrice!"

The girl laughed at her mother's shocked tone.

"Don't worry, Mother dear. He didn't know I was questioning him. And I do love a mystery! All I learned was that it has something to do with Canada. Whenever I talked about the prairie he looked so sad, and once I even thought I saw tears in his eyes."

Beatrice's brows came together in a perplexed frown; then she laughed gently.

"Mysteries have a fascination for me," she said; "I like to puzzle them out. But I must leave you now; for I promised to go see Evelyn this afternoon. I may not get home until late."

Half an hour later Beatrice was in the saddle riding across the bare sweep of prairie to one of the distant homesteads. When she reached the river, the stream was turbid and running fast, but a narrow trail through the poplars on its bank led to the ford, and she urged her horse into it fearlessly. On the other side the trail was very faint, and a stake upon a rise indicated where the crossing was safe. A large grass fire was burning some miles away, for a tawny cloud of smoke trailed across the plain.

Beatrice spent a pleasant hour with her friend and started home alone as dusk was falling. The sky was clear, and the moon hung some distance above the horizon. A cold breeze had sprung up, and the grass fire had grown fiercer. Beatrice could see it stretching toward the river in a long red line; and after a while she rode into the smoke. It grew thicker and more acrid; she could not see her way; and her horse was getting frightened. When an orange glare leaped up not far away, the animal broke into a gallop, pulling hard, and after some trouble in stopping it Beatrice changed her direction. She was not afraid of prairie fires, which, as a rule, can be avoided easily, but this one would necessitate her making a round.

She found it difficult to get out of the smoke, and when she reached the river it was at some distance above the stake. She could not ride back, because the fire was moving up from that direction, cutting her off. She glanced dubiously at the water. It ran fast between steep, timber-covered banks. She did not think she could get down to it, and she knew there was only one safe ford. Still, she could not spend the night upon the wrong bank, and the fire was drawing closer all the time. Worse still, her horse was becoming unmanageable. She rode upstream for a mile; but the river looked deep, and the eddies swirled in a forbidding way; the bank was abrupt and rotten, and Beatrice dared not attempt it. In front, the moon, which was getting higher, threw a clear light upon the water; behind, the smoke rolled up thickly to meet her. The fire was closing in upon the stream. With his nostrils filled with the sting of the smoke, the horse reared and threatened to dash over the crumbling

bank. Beatrice, realizing her danger, turned him back downstream and gave him the rein.

She did not hope to reach the ford — there was a wall of impenetrable fire and smoke between her and the stake; she could not attempt the river where the bank was so steep and the current so swift.

With her own eyes smarting, and her breathing difficult, Beatrice suddenly leaned forward and patted the trembling horse. He had not been able to run far with his lungs full of smoke, and he had now stopped in a moment of indecision.

"Good boy!" she coaxed, in a voice that was not quite steady. "Go a little farther, and then we'll try the river."

"*Hello!*" came out of the darkness; and through the acrid haze she saw a man running toward her.

She hailed him eagerly; but when he reached her she was somewhat disconcerted to notice that he was not, as she had expected, one of the Allenwood settlers.

She saw that he was waiting for her to speak.

"I want to get across, and the fire has driven me from the ford," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Grange."

"By your leave!"

He took the bridle and moved along the bank, though he had some trouble with the frightened horse. When they had gone a few yards he turned toward an awkward slope.

"Is this crossing safe?" Beatrice asked in alarm.

"It's not good," he answered quietly. "I can take you through."

Beatrice did not know what gave her confidence, be-

cause the ford looked dangerous, but she let him lead the stumbling horse down to the water. The next moment the man was wading knee-deep, and the stream frothed about the horse's legs. The current was swift and the smoke was thick and biting, but the man went steadily on, and they were some distance from the bank when he turned to her.

"Pick up your skirt," he said bluntly; "it gets steeper."

Beatrice laughed in spite of her danger. The man certainly did not waste words.

When they were nearly across, the moon was suddenly hidden behind a dark cloud, and at that moment the horse lost its footing and made a frantic plunge. Beatrice gasped. But her fright was needless, for her companion had firm control of the animal, and in another few moments they were struggling up the bank.

As they left the timber and came out of the smoke, into the broad moonlight, she told him to stop, for the saddle had slipped in climbing the bank. Then, for the first time, they saw each other clearly.

He was a big man, with a quiet brown face, and Beatrice noticed his start of swift, half-conscious admiration as he looked up at her. It caused her no embarrassment, because she had seen that look on the faces of other men, and knew that she was pretty; but she failed to estimate the effect of her beauty on a man unaccustomed to her type. Sitting with easy grace upon the splendid horse, she had a curiously patrician air. He noticed her fine calm, the steadiness of her deep-blue eyes, and the delicate chiseling of her features; indeed, he never forgot the picture she made,

with the poplars for a background and the moonlight on her face.

"Thank you; I'm afraid you got very wet," she said. "I know my way now."

"You can't ride on," he answered. "The cinch buckle's drawn."

"Oh!"

"You'd better come on to my place. My sister will look after you while I fix it." He smiled as he added: "Miss Mowbray, I presume? You may have heard of me — Craig Harding, from the section just outside your line."

"Oh!" Beatrice repeated. "I didn't know we had neighbors; I have been away. Have you met any of the Allenwood people?"

"A sallow-faced man with dark eyes."

"Kenwyne," said Beatrice. "He's worth knowing. Anybody else?"

"There was a lad with him; about eighteen, riding a gray horse."

"Yes; my brother Lance."

Harding laughed softly.

"That's all," he said; "and our acquaintance didn't go very far."

Beatrice wondered at his amusement, and she gave him a curious glance. He was dressed in old brown overalls, and she thought he had something of the look of the struggling farmers she had seen in Manitoba, hard-bitten men who had come from the bush of Ontario, but there was a difference, though she could not tell exactly where it lay. Harding's clothes were old and plain, and she could see that he worked with

his hands, yet there was something about him which suggested a broader mind and more culture than she associated with the rude preemptors. Then, though he was curt, his intonation was unusually clean.

She asked him a few questions about his farm, which he answered pleasantly. They were walking side by side along one of the prairie trails, and he was leading the horse. The breeze had fallen and the night was unusually still, broken only by a coyote calling insistently to his mate; the wide, bare prairie ahead of them lay bathed in moonlight.

Presently a light twinkled across the plain; and Beatrice welcomed it, because, in spite of the precautions she had taken, her long skirt was wet and uncomfortable.

When they reached the camp they found Hester busy cooking at a fire. Behind her stood a rude board shelter and a tent, and farther off the skeleton of a house rose from the grass.

Beatrice studied Hester Harding with interest. Though she found her simply dressed, with sleeves rolled back and hands smeared with flour, the prairie girl made a favorable impression on her. She liked the sensitive, grave face, and the candid, thoughtful look.

While the girth was being mended, the girls talked beside the fire. Then Harding saddled his own horse, and he and Beatrice rode off across the prairie. When the lights of the Grange were visible he turned back; and soon afterward Beatrice was laughingly relating her adventure to her mother and Lance.

"So it was Harding who helped you!" Lance exclaimed. "I made a rather bad blunder in talking to

him the other day — told him he mustn't cut some timber which it seems was his. But, I must say, he was rather decent about it."

He looked at his sister curiously, and then laughed.

"On the whole," he added, as she started up the stairs, "it might be better not to say anything about your little experience to the Colonel. I'm inclined to think it might not please him."

Beatrice saw that her mother agreed with Lance, and she was somewhat curious; but she went on up to her room without asking any questions.

She began to feel interested in Harding.

CHAPTER IV

THE OPENING OF THE RIFT

A WEEK after his meeting with Beatrice Mowbray, Harding went out one morning to plow. He was in a thoughtful mood, but it was characteristic that he did not allow his reflections to interfere with his work. His house was unfinished, and the nights were getting cold; but neither Hester nor he placed personal comfort first, and there was a strip of land that must be broken before the frost set in.

It was a calm morning and bright sunshine poured down upon the grass that ran back, growing faintly blue in the distance, until it faded into the mellow haze that shut in the wide circle of prairie. Here and there the smooth expanse was broken by small, gleaming ponds and wavy lines of timber picked out in delicate shades of indigo and gray, but the foreground was steeped in strong color. Where the light struck it, the withered grass shone like silver; elsewhere it was streaked with yellow and cinnamon. The long furrows traced across it were a rich chocolate-brown, and the turned-back clods had patches of oily brightness on their faces. The leaves in a neighboring bluff formed spots of cadmium; and even the big breaker plow, painted crude green and vermilion, did not seem out of place. It was a new implement, the best that Harding could buy, and two brawny red oxen hauled

it along. Oxen are economical to feed and have some advantages in the first stages of breaking land, but Harding meant to change them for Clydesdale horses and experiment with mechanical traction. He used the old methods where they paid, but he believed in progress.

As he guided the slowly moving beasts and watched the clods roll back, his brown face was grave; for he had been troubled during the past seven days. When he looked up at Beatrice Mowbray on the river bank something strange and disturbing had happened to him. He was not given to indulgence in romantic sentiment and, absorbed as he had been, first by the necessity of providing for his sister and himself, and afterward by practical ambitions, he had seldom spared a thought to women. Marriage did not attract him. He felt no longing for close companionship or domestic comfort; indeed, he rather liked a certain amount of hardship. True, his heart had once or twice been mildly stirred by girls he had met. They were pretty and likable — otherwise he would not have been attracted, for his taste was good.

In some respects, Harding was primitive; but this, perhaps, tended to give him a clearer understanding of essential things, and he had a vague belief that he would some day meet the woman who was destined to be his true mate. What was more, he would recognize her when he saw her.

And when he had looked up at Beatrice in the moonlight, standing out, clear cut, against the somber background of poplars, the knowledge that she was the one woman had rushed over him, surging through him as strong as the swift-running river through which he

had brought her. But, now that the thing had happened, he must grapple with a difficult situation. He knew his own value, and believed that he had abilities which would carry him far toward material success; but he also knew his limitations and the strength of the prejudices that would be arrayed against him. That he should hope to win this girl of patrician stock was, in a sense, ludicrous. Yet he had read courage in her, and steadfastness; if she loved him, she would not count too great any sacrifice she made for his sake. But this was only one side of the matter. Brought up as she had been, she might not stand the strain of such a life as his must be for a time. A deep tenderness awoke within him; he felt that she must be sheltered from all trouble and gently cared for.

Harding suddenly broke into a grim laugh. He was going much too fast — there was no reason to believe that the girl had given him a passing thought.

With a call to the oxen he went on with his plowing, and the work brought him encouragement. It was directly productive: next fall the prairie he ripped apart would be covered with ripening grain. He had found that no well-guided effort was lost: it bore fruit always — in his case, at the rate of twenty bushels of wheat, or fifty bushels of oats, to the acre. When the seed was wisely sown the harvest followed; and Harding had steadily enlarged his crop. Now he had made his boldest venture; and he looked forward to the time when his labor should change the empty plain into a fertile field.

A jolt of the plow disturbed him, and as he looked up the oxen stopped. The share had struck hard ground. On one side, a sinuous line of trail, rutted

by wheels and beaten firm by hoofs, seamed the prairie; on the other, the furrows ran across and blotted it out. It was a road the Allenwood settlers used, and Harding knew well what he was doing when he plowed into it. Still, the land was his and must produce its proper yield of grain, while to clear the trail with his implements would entail much useless labor. He had no wish to be aggressive, but if these people took his action as a challenge, the fault would be theirs. It was with a quiet, determined smile that he called to the oxen and held down the share.

At noon he turned the animals loose, and going back to camp, felt his heart throb as he saw Beatrice Mowbray talking to Hester. A team stood near by, and the boy he had met in the bluff was stooping down beside a light four-wheeled vehicle. Beatrice gave Harding a smile of recognition and went on talking, but her brother came up to him.

"The pole came loose," he explained; "and I thought you might lend me something to fasten it with."

"Certainly," Harding said, stooping to examine the damaged pole. "It won't fasten," he added. "It's broken between the iron straps, and there's not wood enough to bolt them on again."

Lance frowned.

"That's a nuisance!"

"I will give you a pole," Harding said. "There is some lumber here that will do."

He picked up a small birch log as he spoke, and, throwing it upon two trestles, set to work with an ax. When he had it about the right size, Lance interrupted him.

"That's good enough. I'll get it smoothed off when the carpenter comes out from the settlement."

"That is not my plan," Harding smiled. "I like to finish a job."

He adjusted a plane, and Beatrice watched him as he ran it along the pole. It had not struck her hitherto that one could admire the simple mechanical crafts, but she thought there was something fine in the prairie farmer's command of the tool. She noticed his easy poise as he swung to and fro, the rhythmic precision of his movements, and the accurate judgment he showed. As the thin shavings streamed across his wrist the rough log began to change its form, growing through gently tapered lines into symmetry. Though he had only his eye to guide him, Beatrice saw that he was skilfully striking the balance between strength and lightness, and it was a surprise to find elements of beauty in such a common object as a wagon-pole. She felt that Harding had taught her something when he turned to Lance, saying:

"There! I guess we can put that in."

The irons were soon refitted, and while Lance harnessed the team, Beatrice came to Harding with a smile.

"Thank you!" she said. "It's curious that you should help me out of a difficulty twice within a week."

Harding flushed.

"If you should happen to meet with another, I hope I'll be near," he returned.

"You like helping people?"

He pondered this longer than she thought it deserved.

"I believe I like straightening things out. It jars me to see any one in trouble when there's a way of

getting over it; and I hate to see effort wasted and tools unfit for work."

"Efficiency is your ideal, then?"

"Yes. I don't know that it ever struck me before, but you have hit it. All the same, efficiency is hard to attain."

Beatrice looked at him curiously.

"I don't believe you are really a carpenter," she said.

"Unless you have plenty of money when you start breaking prairie, you have to be a number of things," he answered, smiling. "Difficulties keep cropping up, and they must be attacked."

"Without previous knowledge or technical training?"

He gave her a quick, appreciative glance.

"You have a knack of getting at the heart of things!" he said in his blunt way. "It's not common."

Beatrice laughed, but she felt mildly flattered. She liked men to treat her seriously; and so few of them did. Somehow she felt that Harding was an unusual man: his toil-roughened hands and his blunt manner of speech were at variance with the indefinite air of culture and good-breeding that hovered round him. There was strength, shown plainly; and she felt that he had ability — when confronted with a difficult problem he would find the best solution. It was interesting to lead him on; but she was to find him ready to go much farther than she desired.

"I hope making the new pole for us wasn't too much trouble," she said lightly.

"It gives me keen pleasure to be of any use to you," he said.

The color swept into Beatrice's face, for he was looking at her with an intent expression that made it impossible to take his remark lightly. She was angry with herself for feeling confused while he looked so cool.

"That sounds rather cheap," she replied with a touch of scorn.

"My excuse is that it's exactly what I felt."

Composure in difficult circumstances was one of the characteristics of her family, yet Beatrice felt at a loss. Harding, she thought, was not the man to yield to a passing impulse or transgress from unmeaning effrontery; but this made the shock worse.

Lance saved the situation by announcing that the team was ready.

As the buggy jolted away across the plain, Beatrice sat silent. She felt indignant, humiliated, in a sense; but thrilled in spite of this. The man's tone had been earnest and his gaze steadfast. He meant what he said. But he had taken an unwarrantable liberty. Nobody knew anything about him except that he was a working farmer. Her cheeks burned as she realized that she had, perhaps, been to blame in treating him too familiarly. Then her anger began to pass. After all, it was easy to forgive sincere admiration, and he was certainly a fine type — strong and handsome, clever with his hands, and, she thought, endowed with unusual mental power. There was something flattering in the thought that he had appreciated her. For all that, he must be given no opportunity for repeating the offense; he must be shown that there was a wide gulf between them.

Lance broke in upon her thoughts.

"I like that fellow," he said. "It's a pity he isn't more of our kind."

Beatrice pondered. Harding was not of their kind; but she did not feel sure that the difference was wholly in favor of the Allenwood settlers. This struck her as strange; as it was contrary to the opinions she had hitherto held.

"Why?" she asked carelessly.

"We might have seen something of him then."

"Can't you do so now, if you wish?"

"I'm not sure. It might not please the Colonel — you know his opinions."

Beatrice smiled, for she had often heard them dogmatically expressed.

"After all, what is there he could object to about Harding?" she asked.

"Not much in one sense; a good deal in another. You can't deny that the way one is brought up makes a difference. Perhaps the worst is that he's frankly out for money — farming for dollars."

"Aren't we?"

"Not now. We're farming for pleasure. But Kenwyne and one or two others think there'll have to be a change in that respect before long."

"Then we'll be in the same position as Harding, won't we?"

"I suppose so," Lance admitted. "But the Colonel won't see it; and I can't say that he's wrong."

"It seems rather complicated," Beatrice said dryly.

She was surprised to find herself ready to contend for Harding, and rather than inquire into the cause of this, she talked about Allenwood affairs until they reached home.

Harding, back at his plowing, was thinking of Beatrice. He knew that he had spoken rashly, but he did not regret it. She now knew what he thought of her, and could decide what course to take. He smiled as he imagined her determining that he must be dropped, for he believed the mood would soon pass. He did not mean to persecute the girl with unwelcome attentions, but it would not be easy to shake him off. He was tenacious and knew how to wait. Then, the difference between them was, after all, less wide than she probably imagined. Harding had kept strictly to his compact not to try to learn anything of his father's people in England; but, for all that, he believed himself to be the girl's equal by birth. That, however, was a point that could not be urged; and he had no wish to urge it. He was content to stand or fall by his own merits as a man; and if Beatrice was the girl he thought her, she would not let his being a working farmer stand in the way. This, of course, was taking it for granted that he could win her love. He was ready to fight against her relatives' opposition; but, even if he had the power, he would put no pressure on the girl. If he was the man she ought to marry, she would know.

A breeze got up, rounded clouds with silver edges gathered in the west, streaking the prairie with patches of indigo shadow, and the air grew cooler as the sun sank. The big oxen steadily plodded on, the dry grass crackled beneath the share as the clods rolled back, and by degrees Harding's mind grew tranquil — as generally happened when he was at work. He was doing something worth while in breaking virgin ground, in clearing a way for the advancing host that would people the wilderness, in roughing out a career

for himself. Whatever his father's people were, his mother sprang from a stern, colonizing stock, and he heard and thrilled to the call for pioneers.

As the sun sank low, a man pulled up his horse at the end of the trail and beckoned Harding. There was something imperious in his attitude, as he sat with his hand on his hip, watching the farmer haughtily; and Harding easily guessed that it was Colonel Mowbray. He went on with his furrow, and only after he had driven the plow across the grass road did he stop.

"Are you Mr. Harding, the owner of this section?" demanded the head of Allenwood.

"Yes."

"Then I must express my surprise that you have broken up our trail."

"It was necessary. I dislike blocking a trail, but you can go round by the road."

"You can see that it's soft and boggy in wet weather."

"Five minutes' extra ride will take you over gravel soil inside the Allenwood range."

"Do you expect us to waste five minutes whenever we come this way?"

"My time is valuable, and if I let your trail stand it would cost me a good deal of extra labor. I must have a straight unbroken run for my machines."

"So, sooner than throw an implement out of gear while you cross the trail, you take this course! Do you consider it neighborly?"

Harding smiled. He remembered that in Manitoba any help the nearest farmer could supply had been willingly given. At Allenwood, he had been left alone.

That did not trouble him; but he thought of Hester, enduring many discomforts in her rude, board shack while women surrounded by luxury lived so near.

"I can't see any reason why I should be neighborly," he replied.

Mowbray glanced at him with a hint of embarrassment.

"Have you any complaint against us?"

"None," said Harding coolly. "I only mentioned the matter because you did so."

He imagined that Mowbray was surprised by his reserve.

"You may be able to understand," the Colonel said, "that it's rash for an intruding stranger to set himself against local customs, not to speak of the discourtesy of the thing. When a new trail is made at Allenwood, every holder is glad to give all the land that's needed."

"Land doesn't seem to be worth as much to you as it is to me, judging from the way you work it. Every rod of mine must grow something. I don't play at farming."

Mowbray grew red in the face, but kept himself in hand.

"Do you wish to criticize our methods?" he demanded.

"I've nothing to do with your methods. It's my business to farm this section as well as it can be done. I've no wish to annoy your people; but you do not use the trail for hauling on, and I can't change my plans because they may interfere with your amusements."

"Very well," Mowbray answered coldly. "There is nothing more to be said."

He rode away and Harding started his oxen. It might have been more prudent to make a few concessions and conciliate the Colonel, but Harding could not bring himself to do so. It seemed a shabby course. It was better that the Allenwood settlers should know at the beginning how matters stood and of what type their new neighbor was.

From all that Harding had learned of Colonel Mowbray, he felt that this stretch of grassland would not be turned into a glowing sea of wheat without more than one conflict between himself and the head of Allenwood.

CHAPTER V

THE SPENDTHRIFT

KENWYNE felt pleasantly languid as he lounged in a basket-chair after his evening meal. He had been back-setting land since daybreak. Holding the plow was an occupation almost unknown to the Allenwood settlers, who left all the rougher work to their hired men. Kenwyne, however, was of a practical turn of mind; and, having invested all his money in his farm, he meant to get some return. He occasionally enjoyed a run with the coyote hounds, or a day's shooting when the migrating geese and ducks rested among the sloos; but for the most part he stuck steadily to his work and, as he bought the latest implements, he was considered richer than he really was. Though thirty, he was unmarried; an elderly Scottish housekeeper looked after him.

One of the obstacles to Allenwood's progress was that the bachelors outnumbered the married men; and the difficulty seemed insuperable. The settlers belonged to an exclusive caste, and few young Englishwomen of education and refinement had shown themselves willing to face the hardships of the prairie life; though these were softened at Allenwood by many of the amenities of civilization. Moreover, it was known to the rasher youths, who occasionally felt tempted by the good looks of the daughters of the soil, that

Colonel Mowbray sternly discountenanced anything of the nature of a *mésalliance,* and that the married women would deal even more strictly with the offenders. Broadwood, for example, had broken the settlement's traditions, and he and his Canadian wife had suffered.

While Kenwyne was reading an old newspaper, Gerald Mowbray sauntered in. He had a careless, genial manner that made him a favorite, but there was a hint of weakness in his face, and Kenwyne had never trusted him. It was known that he had been wild and extravagant; but at Allenwood that was not generally regarded as a grave drawback. They were charitable there; several of the younger men, who now made good settlers, had left England at their relatives' urgent request, after gaining undesirable notoriety.

Gerald selected a comfortable chair and passed his cigar-case to Kenwyne.

"They're good," he said. "I had them sent from Montreal."

"No, thanks," replied Kenwyne. "I've given up such extravagances, and stick to the labeled plug. I don't want to be officious, but it might be better if you did the same."

Gerald smiled.

"You're rather a sordid beggar, Ralph; but as that's often a sign of prosperity, it makes me hopeful. I want you to lend me two hundred pounds."

"Impossible!" said Kenwyne firmly.

"One hundred and fifty, then?"

"Equally out of the question. All I have is sunk in stock, and earmarked for next year's operations." Kenwyne paused and considered. He knew the

chances were slight that the money would ever be returned; yet he respected Colonel Mowbray, and his loyalty extended to the family of the head of Allenwood. "Why do you want the money?" he asked.

"I suppose I'll have to tell you. It goes back to India — what you might call a 'debt of honor.' I borrowed the money in London to square it; and thought when I came to Canada I'd be too far away for the London fellow to put undue pressure on me. Oh, I meant to pay sometime, when I was ready; but the fellow transferred the debt to a man at Winnipeg, who has sent me a curt demand with an extortionate bill of expenses. Now I have to pay."

"I suppose you have been round the settlement?"

"Yes; but I haven't collected much. In fact, I'm afraid I'll have to pledge my farm."

"You can't do that. Our foundation covenant forbids a settler to alienate his land without the consent of a majority in the council, subject to the president's veto. Your father would certainly use his veto."

"Very true," Gerald agreed. "However, I don't propose to alienate my land — only to pawn it for a time."

"It's against the spirit of the deed."

"I've nothing to do with its spirit. The covenant should say what it means, and it merely states that a settler shall not sell to any person who's not a member of the colony. I'm not going to sell."

"You're going to do a dangerous thing," Kenwyne warned him.

"Then the remedy is for you to let me have a thousand dollars," Gerald said quickly.

"It is impossible; but I will try to raise five hundred. I suppose the Colonel does not know you have come to me?"

"I rely upon your not letting him know." Gerald smiled in that ingratiating way that won him many friends. "I'm deeply grateful, and you're a good sort, Ralph, though in some ways you differ from the rest of us. I don't know where you got your tradesman's spirit."

"It won't be so singular before long," Kenwyne answered with dry amusement. "Even now, Broadwood and one or two others ——"

"Broadwood doesn't count. He married a girl of the soil."

"He loves her, and she makes him a good wife."

"Yes, but it was a mistake. You know our traditions."

Kenwyne laughed, and nodded toward the open window, through which they heard the sound of cheerful whistling approaching them along the trail.

"I suspect that's Broadwood now," he said.

"Well, I must be going. I will call for the check to-morrow."

Gerald left as Broadwood entered.

"I can guess what he wanted. He was at my place," Broadwood said, as he took the seat Gerald had vacated.

"Ah! I'll wager he didn't go away empty-handed," Kenwyne smiled.

"Perhaps I'm betraying a confidence in admitting it. Anyway, I felt that one ought to help him for the family's sake, lest he get into worse trouble; and

I could afford the loan. Since I married I've been making some money. But I want to ask you about this Harding. What kind of fellow is he?"

"I like what I've seen of him. Why?"

"Effie has been talking about his sister. Seemed to think it was unkind to leave the girl alone — in want, perhaps, of odds and ends a woman could supply. I think she has made up her mind to go see her."

"I'm not sure that would meet with general approval. What did you say?"

"I seldom give my opinion on these matters," Broadwood answered with a laugh. "On the whole, I think Effie's right; and I suspect that knowing the thing won't please the others gives it a charm. After all, she hasn't much reason for respecting their prejudices. At first, they nearly drove us out of Allenwood."

"I'm glad you didn't go. Your wife is steadily gaining ground, and the others will be glad to copy her after a while."

"That's my idea; we'll have to work our land. Have you ever thought what the Colonel could do with his big block, if he had the capital?"

"*And* the wish!" said Kenwyne. "The obstacle is his point of view. Besides, all of it isn't really his: Mrs. Mowbray, Beatrice, and the boys have a share. Of course, his taking the lots as one gives him a solid vote in the council, and with the veto he has on certain points makes him an absolute ruler."

"So long as his family support him!"

"Can you imagine their doing the contrary?"

"I've thought the Colonel's position was least se-

cure from an attack within," Broadwood answered thoughtfully. "It doesn't follow that a man's family is bound to agree with him. Gerald's a dark horse, and one can't predict what he'll do, except that it will be what suits himself. Lance is young and headstrong; and Beatrice has a mind of her own. . . . But I really came to ask your opinion about this sketch of a new stable. I must buy another team."

They discussed the plan for the new building until it grew late and Broadwood went home.

The following day Gerald Mowbray left Allenwood for Winnipeg. It was a dismal, wet evening when he arrived; and Winnipeg was not an attractive city at that time. There were a few fine stores and offices on Main Street; Portage Avenue was laid out, and handsome buildings were rising here and there; but, for the most part, the frame houses had a dilapidated, squalid look. Rows of pedlers' shacks stretched back from the wooden station, the streets were unpaved, and the churned-up prairie soil lay in sticky clods upon the rude plank sidewalks. Dripping teams floundered heavily through the mire. Although the city was beginning to feel the stir of commercial activity, the dark corners were devoted to questionable amusements.

Gerald had supper at his hotel, and afterward found the time hang upon his hands. The general lounge was badly lighted, and its uncovered floor was smeared with gumbo mud from the boots of the wet men who slouched in to the bar. The door kept swinging open, letting in cold draughts; and Gerald could find nobody to talk to. He had not enough money to pay off his debt, but thought he had sufficient to enable him to

make some compromise with his creditor, and so had determined to see what could be done. It was, however, impossible to spend the dismal evening at the hotel, and he knew where excitement might be found at a moderate cost — that is, if one were cautious and lucky.

Going out, he made his way toward a side street running down to the river, and noticed the keen glance an armed Northwest policeman gave him as he turned the corner. Gerald thought it a desirable spot to station the constable.

A ramshackle frame house down the street was glaringly illuminated, and Gerald, entering, found a number of men and one or two women in two gaudily furnished rooms. There was another room at the back where refreshments were dispensed without a license. For the most part, the men were young, brown-faced fellows who had spent the summer on the lonely plains; but a few had a hard and sinister look. The girls were pretty and stylishly dressed, but they had a predatory air.

In one corner of the room an exciting poker game seemed to be in progress. At the other end a roulette table was surrounded by a crowd of eager players. Gerald was fond of games of chance, and he saw ahead of him a pleasant evening. Leaning against the bar, he was merely an onlooker for a while. The glare of light and the air of excitement, the eager faces of the players and the click of the balls fascinated him.

He had not been drinking heavily; yet to his annoyance he felt a trifle unsteady when at last he strolled over to the roulette table. His first mistake was to take a five-dollar bill from the wallet which

contained the money to pay his debt. More than one pair of greedy eyes saw the thick wad of paper currency; and from that moment Gerald was a marked man in the room.

In the gray hour preceding daybreak, when, sick and dizzy, Gerald stumbled back to his hotel, he found that he had only ten dollars remaining of the amount that had been entrusted to him to settle his debt. Ten dollars would not pay his hotel bill, even.

He woke about noon, his head aching severely. He could form no definite idea as to what was best to be done. One thing, however, was certain: No one at Allenwood must know how he had spent the preceding evening. His relatives had no reason for believing his conduct irreproachable, but so long as he did not thrust his failings upon their notice they ignored them. Then, the revelation of how he had lost the money given him would no doubt lead to his banishment from Allenwood; and except for a small allowance from his mother's English property, he had no resources. The survey he had been engaged upon was abandoned for a time, and he could find no other employment. He must hold on at Allenwood, trusting that something would turn up, and augmenting his income by the small sums he might win from the younger men at cards. First of all, however, he must call upon his creditor; it was a disagreeable task, but one that could not be shirked.

CHAPTER VI

THE MORTGAGE BROKER

DAVIES sat at his desk sorting a bundle of papers. His office, a large room in a smart, new building, was elaborately furnished; but the furnishings spelled expense rather than taste. The walls were hung with maps of the Canadian territories, plans of new town sites, and photographs of buildings. Davies was one of a class that was, for a time, to exercise a far-reaching influence on the Western prairie. His business was to sell the new settlers land — which was seldom paid for on the spot; the agent being willing to take what he could get and leave the balance on mortgage. He also lent money to farmers who had suffered from bad seasons, or who rashly determined to extend their operations with borrowed capital.

Interest was then very high, and the scratch-farming generally practised was not productive. Crops on the half-worked soil suffered from drought and blight, and often ripened too late to escape the autumn frost; yet, in spite of these disadvantages, the influx of new settlers forced up the price of land. As a rule, the unfortunate farmer soon became indebted to local storekeepers as well as to the man from whom he had bought his holding. When he harvested a good crop, he paid off some arrears of interest, and perhaps kept a few dollars to go on with; but he seldom got out of

debt, and so toiled on, living with stern frugality, while the money-lender pocketed his earnings. Shylock ran no risk, since the security was good and he could sell up the defaulter. For a time, many of the small homesteaders struggled with dire poverty, in spite of legislation intended to protect them; and it was not until a succession of good harvests and the gradual development of the country enabled them to break the yoke of the usurer that a tide of prosperity flowed across the plains.

Davies was an unfavorable specimen of his class. There were some land and mortgage agents who dealt fairly with their clients and even ran some risk in keeping them on their feet; but Davies was cunning, grasping, and pitiless.

When Gerald entered he gave him a curt nod, snapped a rubber band around the papers, placed them carefully in a pigeonhole in his desk, and then turned to his caller.

"Mr. Mowbray! I expected to see you sooner. Guess you have come to settle your account."

Gerald found it hard to keep his temper. He had an aristocratic contempt for all traders, and had, even in Canada, generally been treated with some deference.

"In the first place, I don't see what you have to do with this debt," he began. "I borrowed from parties in London, and I'm responsible to them."

"Here's my authority," Davies said, handing him a letter. "Whether the lender instructed me to collect the money for him, or made other arrangements doesn't matter to you. I can give you a receipt that will stand good as soon as you put up the money."

"Unfortunately, that is more than I can do."

Davies did not look surprised.

"What's your proposition?" he asked.

"I'll think over yours," Gerald answered as coolly as he could.

Davies studied him for a moment or two. Gerald's expression was supercilious, but his face did not indicate much strength of character. Besides, the only justification for arrogance that Davies recognized was the possession of money.

"You're the son of Colonel Mowbray of Allenwood, aren't you? Your people hold a good piece of land there."

"You seem to know all about me. I'd better warn you, however, that you won't find my relatives willing to pay my debts."

Davies smiled.

"I could try them. They might do something if I stated my claim."

This was what Gerald had feared, and he could not hide his alarm.

"It will save you trouble if you realize that you wouldn't get a dollar," he said hastily.

Davies was silent for a few moments. As a matter of fact, he was by no means anxious to be paid. Allenwood was isolated as yet, and the land accordingly not worth much, but the homesteads were unusually good and the advance of cultivation and settlement would largely increase their value. Davies wanted a hold on Allenwood which might be turned to advantage later, and he now saw an opportunity for getting it. Young Mowbray obviously objected to having his friends learn how he was situated, and this would make him easier to manage.

"Well," Davies said, "you have some land there, haven't you? What's the acreage, township, and range?"

Gerald named them, and Davies made some calculations on a piece of paper before he looked up.

"If I find this all right in the land register, I'll cancel your London debt, and take a mortgage on your holding," he said, handing Gerald the paper he had been writing on. "Here's an outline of the terms."

"The interest's extortionate!"

"If you think so, go round the town and see if you can find anybody who'll be more liberal. If not, you can come back to-morrow and we'll fix up the deal."

Davies felt safe in making the suggestion. He did not think Gerald had much business ability, and trusted to his reluctance to make his embarrassments known. Besides, the mortgage brokers had their hands full and were not all so confident of the rapid advance of settlement as Davies was. Indeed, there were men who declared that the country was being opened up too rapidly, and predicted a bad set-back.

Gerald left Davies' office with a faint hope of being able to find a safer way out of the difficulty. To give his land in pledge would be a violation of the covenant that bound the Allenwood settlers. It was an offense that his father and his neighbors could not forgive. He shrank from the dangerous course; but the day went by without his finding any escape, and the next morning he called on Davies and the mortgage was signed.

While Gerald was at Winnipeg, Mrs. Broadwood startled the settlement at Allenwood by calling on Harding's sister. The visit was prompted by sym-

pathy for the lonely prairie girl; but, coupled with that, Mrs. Broadwood delighted in the feeling that all the Allenwood women would disapprove of her course. She was small and pretty, with plenty of determination and an exuberant cheerfulness which contact with her husband's friends had somewhat toned down; and there was about her an air of homely Western frankness that was charming.

When she reached Harding's camp, Hester sat sewing in the sun. The girl made a remarkably pretty picture, she thought, seated beside a pile of prairie hay, with a few purple asters springing up at her feet and, behind her, a ragged pine-tree drooping its branches to the ground. And over all the gold of sunshine.

"You look like a priestess of the sun!" Mrs. Broadwood greeted her, laughing.

Hester smiled in response.

"I'm sitting outside because it's rather damp and cold in the shack," she said. "As you see, our house isn't finished yet."

She rose as she spoke, and came forward, and Mrs. Broadwood looked at her admiringly. Hester was tall and naturally dignified, and her characteristic expression was grave composure. Besides, her visitor remarked the excellent taste and fit of her simple dress.

"I'm sure we're going to be friends," said Mrs. Broadwood.

"I hope so," Hester answered simply.

The visitor found a seat in the prairie hay, and sinking down in the soft grass, she breathed the smell of

wild peppermint with delight. She noticed the hearth of parallel logs, with a big kerosene can, used as a washing boiler, hanging from a tripod at one end; the camp oven; the sawing frame; and the scented cedar shingles strewn about beside the framework of the house. All these things were familiar, for she was one of the pioneers.

"My!" she exclaimed. "This *is* nice! Makes me feel homesick."

"It must be a change from Allenwood," Hester answered with a smile.

"That's why I like it! I'm quite happy there; but this is the kind of place where I belong. Twice before I met my husband I helped make a new home on the plains, and this spot reminds me of the last time. We fixed camp by Stony Creek in early summer, when the grass was green and all the flowers were out. There were rows of the red prairie lilies. I never saw so many! — and I remember how the new birch leaves used to rustle in the bluff at night. Thinking of it somehow hurts me." She laughed prettily. "I'm what Tom calls a sentimentalist."

"So am I," said Hester; "so you needn't stop."

"Well, I remember everything about the night we put in our stakes — Sally baking bannocks, with the smoke going straight up; the loaded wagons in a row; the tired horses rolling in the grass; and the chunk of the boys' axes, chopping in the bluff. Though we'd been on the trail since sun-up, there was work for hours, bread to bake and clothes to wash; and when we went to sleep, a horse got his foot in a line and brought the tent down on us. It was all hard in those

days, a hustle from dawn to dark; but now, when things are different, I sometimes want them back. But I needn't tell you — I guess you know!"

"Yes; I know," said Hester. "Perhaps it's the work we were born for."

She was silent for a few moments, looking far out over the prairie; then she asked abruptly:

"What are the Allenwood people like?"

"They're much the same as you and I, but they wear more frills, and when you rub against those who use the most starch you find them prickly. Then, they've some quaint notions that Walter Raleigh or Jacques Cartier must have brought over; but, taking them all round, they're a straight, clean crowd." She looked intently at Hester. "Somehow you make me feel that you belong to them."

Hester smiled. Mrs. Broadwood was impulsive and perhaps not always discreet, but Hester thought her true.

"I don't understand that," she replied. "Though I think my mother was a woman of unusual character, she came from the Michigan bush. My father was English, but he had only a small farm and didn't bring us up differently from our neighbors. Still, he had different ideas and bought a good many books. Craig and I read them all, and he would talk to us about them."

"Craig's your brother? I've seen him once or twice. Tell me about him."

Hester nodded toward the trail that wormed its way across the prairie. A girl was riding toward them.

"Beatrice Mowbray," Mrs. Broadwood said; "the

best of them all at Allenwood, though sometimes she's not easy to get on with."

When Beatrice joined them, Mrs. Broadwood repeated her suggestion. She was frankly curious, and Hester was not unwilling to talk about her brother. Indeed, she made the story an interesting character sketch, and Beatrice listened quietly while she told how the lad was left with a patch of arid soil, and his mother and sister to provide for. Hester related how he braved his neighbors' disapproval of the innovations which they predicted would lead him to ruin, and by tenacity and boldness turned threatened failure into brilliant success. Then losing herself in her theme, she sketched the birth of greater ambitions, and the man's realization of his powers. Beatrice's eyes brightened with keen approval. She admired strength and daring, and Hester had drawn a striking picture of her brother.

When the visitors rose to go, Harding appeared. He had come, he explained, for an ox-chain clevis.

"I have another visit to make," Beatrice said, when he had helped her to mount. "The shortest way is across the ravine and there used to be a trail, unless you have plowed it up."

"No," he laughed; "I mean to improve that one. However, as it's not very good, and there's an awkward place, I'll show you the way down."

They left the camp together, and Harding was not pleased to notice no difference in the girl's attitude to him. He had not expected her to show embarrassment, but he would not have minded a dignified aloofness. It looked as if she had not thought it worth while to resent his boldness when they last met. For

all that, it made his heart beat fast to be near her.

Beatrice glanced toward the dark-brown line of the fall plowing.

"Do you know what our people are saying about you? You haven't shown much regard for your neighbors' feelings."

"I'd try to respect their needs."

"Well, that is something. Still, the trail was at least convenient, and it had stood for a number of years."

"I'm afraid some more of the old landmarks will have to go. These are changing times."

"And I suppose there's satisfaction in feeling that you are leading the way?"

"I can't claim that," Harding answered with a smile. "As a matter of fact, we're following a plain trail; the fur-traders blazed it for us before the railroad came; and I dare say your father had broken ground at Allenwood when I was learning to harness a team."

"It doesn't seem to make you diffident. Now, I agree with my friends that there's a good deal to admire in the old order."

"That's so. All that's best in it will stay; you can't destroy it. In a way, it's a comforting thought because we can't stand still, and progress means a fight."

"And yet some people believe in throwing away the weapons our fathers have used and proved."

Harding laughed.

"When they're fine steel, that's foolish; but we might be allowed to rub off the rust and regrind them."

Beatrice liked his half-humorous manner, which she suspected covered a strong sincerity. Besides, she

had asked for his opinions; he had not obtruded them. She gave him a quick glance of scrutiny as he led her horse down the steep, brush-encumbered trail into the ravine; and she admitted to herself that he improved on acquaintance. One got used to his rough clothes and his line of thought which differed so widely from the views held at Allenwood.

Yellow birch leaves shone about them, the pale-tinted stems were streaked with silver by the sinking sun, and the ravine was filled with heavy blue shadow. There was something strangely exhilarating in the light, glowing color and the sharp wind; and Beatrice felt her senses stirred. Then she noticed Harding's set lips and the concentrated look in his eyes. He seemed to be thinking earnestly and perhaps exercising some self-restraint. She suddenly recalled his presumption the last time they were together. She had not carried out her plan of avoiding him, but she thought it might be better to run no risk.

"I mustn't take you any farther," she said. "The trail is good up the other side."

"All right," he acquiesced. "Turn out at the big poplar."

He stood there in the sunset, his rough felt hat in his hand, the slanting rays playing through his fair hair, watching her until she and her horse coalesced with the blue shadows of the hillside.

It would not be easy to win her, he knew. First, there was the life she had led, in what a different environment from the rough, pioneer one that he had known! Then there were the prejudices of her relatives to consider. She must come to him happily, without one regret.

Harding sighed; but his jaws set determinedly. He had been taught, as a child, that the sweetest apples hang on the highest branches: they are not easy to reach, but, once secured, they are worth the having.

CHAPTER VII

AN ACCIDENT

WITH the help of men from the railroad settlement Harding finished his house and made it weather-proof before the frost struck deep into the soil. Plowing was now impossible, but there was much to be done. The inside of the dwelling had to be fitted up, and logs were needed for the stables he must build in the spring. Trees large enough for the purpose were scarce; and where coal is unobtainable, cutting wood for fuel keeps the settler busy during the rigorous winter. Harding might have simplified his task by buying sawed lumber, but the long railroad haulage made it expensive, and he never shrank from labor which led to economy. He was not a niggard, but he had ambitions and he saw that his money must be made productive if those ambitions were to be gratified.

He was coming home one evening with Devine, bringing a load of wood on his jumper-sled. It had been a bitter day, and the cold got keener as a leaden haze crept up across the plain. There was still a curious gray light, and objects in the immediate foreground stood out with harsh distinctness. The naked branches of the poplars on the edge of the ravine they skirted cut sharply against the sky, and the trail, which ran straight across the thin snow, was marked by a streak of dingy blue. The wind was fitful, but when

it gathered strength the men bent their heads and shivered in their old deerskin jackets.

As the oxen plodded on, Devine looked round at the sled rather anxiously.

"Hadn't you better throw some of these logs off, Craig?" he suggested. "It's a heavy load, and I'm afraid there's a blizzard working up. We want to get home before it breaks."

"The oxen can haul them," Harding replied. "We'll get nothing done for the next few days, and we have our hands plumb full this winter."

"I used to think I was a bit of a hustler," Devine said, "but you sure have me beat."

"If I'm not mistaken, we'll get a lie-off to-morrow." Harding struck one of the oxen with his mittened hand. "Pull out, Bright, before you freeze!"

The big animals moved faster, and the tired men plodded on silently. There is no easy road to wealth on the wheatlands of the West; indeed, it is only by patient labor and stoic endurance that a competence can be attained. Devine and his comrade knew this by stern experience, and, half frozen as they were, they braced themselves for the effort of reaching home. They must adapt their pace to the oxen's, and it was not quick enough to keep them warm.

As they approached a bluff, Harding looked up.

"Somebody riding pretty fast!" he said.

A beat of hoofs, partly muffled by the snow, came down the bitter wind, and a few moments later a horseman appeared from behind the trees. He was indistinct in the gathering gloom, but seemed to be riding furiously, and Harding drew the oxen out of the trail.

"One of the Allenwood boys. Young Mowbray, isn't it?" said Devine.

The next moment Lance Mowbray dashed past them, scattering the snow. The horse was going at a frantic gallop, the rider's fur coat had blown open, his arms were tense, and his hands clenched on the bridle. His face was set, and he gazed fixedly ahead as if he did not see the men and the sledge.

"It's that wild brute of a range horse," Harding remarked. "Nearly bucked the boy off the last time he passed my place. Something in the bluff must have scared him; he has the bit in his teeth."

"Looks like it," Devine agreed. "Young Mowbray can ride, but I'm expecting trouble when he makes the timber."

They turned and stopped to watch, for the Allenwood trail ran down the side of the ravine among the trees not far away. Horse and rider rapidly grew indistinct and vanished over the edge of the hollow. Then there was a dull thud and the beat of hoofs suddenly broke off. The deep silence that followed was ominous.

"Throw the load off, and bring the oxen!" cried Harding as he started to run along the trail.

He was breathless when he reached the edge of the declivity; but he saw nothing when he looked down. A blurred network of trunks and branches rose from the shadowy depths with a pale glimmer of snow beneath; that was all, and there was no sound except the wail of the rising wind. Plunging straight down through the timber, Harding made for a bend of the trail where there was a precipitous bank, and on reaching it he saw a big, dark object lying in the snow

some distance beneath him. This was the horse; its rider could not be far away. When he scrambled down he found the boy lying limp and still, his fur cap fallen off and his coat torn away from his body. His face looked very white, his eyes were closed, and he did not answer when Harding spoke. Kneeling down, he saw that the lad was alive but unconscious. Nothing could be done until Devine arrived.

It was a relief when he heard the oxen stumbling through the brush. Presently Devine came running up, and after a glance at the boy turned and felt the horse.

"Stone dead! What's the matter with Mowbray?"

"Some ribs broken, I suspect," said Harding. "Bring the sled close up. We've got to take him home."

They laid Lance on the jumper, and Harding stripped off his own skin coat and wrapped it round the boy.

"The shock's perhaps the worst thing, and he feels cold."

Both had had some experience of accidents in a country where surgical assistance could seldom be obtained, and Devine nodded agreement.

"Guess we'll have trouble in hauling up the grade and getting to Allenwood before the blizzard, but we've got to make it."

The opposite slope was rough and steep, and the jumper too wide to pass easily between the trees. They had to lift it, and help the oxen here and there; but they struggled up and then found that their difficulties were not over when they reached the open plain. The wind had risen while they were in the hollow and

was now blowing the dry snow about. It had grown dark and the trail was faint.

"Might be wiser to take him to your homestead," Devine suggested; "but they'll be able to look after him better at the Grange. Get a move on the beasts, Craig; we've no time to lose."

Harding urged the oxen, which stepped out briskly with their lighter load, but he had some difficulty in guiding them, though Devine went ahead to keep the trail. It was impossible to see any distance, and there was no landmark on the bare white level; the savage wind buffeted their smarting faces and filled their eyes with snow. The cold struck through Harding's unprotected body like a knife, but he went on stubbornly, keeping his eyes on Devine's half-distinguishable figure. He was sorry for the unconscious youngster, but he did not glance at him. This was a time when pity was best expressed in action.

They had gone about two miles when the blizzard broke upon them in a blinding cloud of snow and the cold suddenly increased. Though he wore a thick jacket, Harding felt as if his flesh had changed to ice; his hands were numb, and his feet seemed dead. He knew the risk he ran of being crippled by frostbite; but to take his coat back might cost Lance his life.

They had been struggling forward for a long time when Devine stopped and came back.

"We've been off the trail for the last ten minutes," he said. "Guess it's got snowed up."

It was a bald statement of an alarming situation. Their only guide had failed them, and unless they could soon find shelter all must perish. It might, perhaps, be possible to keep moving for another hour

or two, and then they would sink down, exhausted, to freeze. Yet, having faced similar perils and escaped, they were not utterly dismayed.

"The long rise can't be very far off," Harding said hopefully. "If we could make it, there's a little coulée running down the other side. Then we ought to see the Grange lights when we strike the lake."

His voice was scarcely audible through the roar of the icy gale, but Devine caught a word or two and understood.

"Then," he shouted back, "you want to keep the wind on your left cheek!"

It was the only guide to the direction of the blast, for the snow whirled about them every way at once, and sight was useless amid the blinding haze. Feeling, however, to some extent remained, and although their faces were freezing into dangerous insensibility, so long as they kept their course one side was still a little more painful than the other. They struggled on, urging the jaded oxen, and dragging them by their heads where the drifts were deep. The snow seemed to thicken as they went. They could not see each other a yard or two apart, and the power that kept them on their feet was dying out of them. Both had been working hard since sunrise, and weary flesh and blood cannot long endure a furious wind when the thermometer falls to forty or fifty below. Nothing broke the surface of the plain except the blowing waves of snow that swirled across their course and beat into their faces. It seemed impossible that they could keep on. Hope had almost left them when Devine suddenly called out:

"It's surely rising ground!"

Harding imagined by the oxen's slower pace, and his own labored breathing, that his comrade was right, but the rise was gradual and extensive. They might wander across it without coming near the lake; but they could take no precautions and much must be left to chance.

"Get on!" he said curtly.

By the force of the wind which presently met them he thought they had reached the summit. Somewhere near them a watercourse started and ran down to the lake; but the men could not tell which way to turn, although they knew that the decision would be momentous. One way led to shelter, the other to death in the snowy wilds.

"Left and down!" Harding cried at a venture.

They trudged on, Devine a few paces in front picking out the trail, and Harding urging forward the snow-blinded oxen. They had not gone more than a few yards when Devine suddenly disappeared. There was a rush of loosened snow apparently falling into a hollow, and then his voice rose, hoarse but exultant.

"We've struck the coulée!"

He scrambled out and it was comparatively easy to follow the ravine downhill; and soon after they left it the surface grew unusually level, and no tufts of withered grass broke the snow.

"Looks like the lake," said Devine. "We'll be safe once we hit the other side."

Harding was nearly frozen, and he began to despair of ever reaching the Grange; but he roused himself from the lethargy into which he was sinking when a faint yellow glimmer shone through the swirling snow. It grew brighter, more lights appeared, and they toiled

up to the front of a building. With some trouble Devine found the door and knocked.

It was opened in a few moments by Gerald Mowbray, who stood looking out in surprise.

Devine briefly explained.

"If it's likely to scare his mother, get her out of the way," he added. "We have to bring him in at once. Send somebody for the oxen, and show us where to go!"

"Wait a moment and I'll meet you," said Gerald, hastening into the house.

When he disappeared, Devine turned to Harding.

"Get hold! You don't want to shake him, but the coats will keep him pretty safe."

With some trouble they carried him in, passed through a vestibule, and came with shuffling steps into a large hall. It was well lighted, and so warm that Harding felt limp and dizzy from the sudden change of temperature. His skin burned, the blood rushed to his head, and he stopped for fear he should drop his burden. Gerald, it seemed, had not had time to warn the people in the hall, and Beatrice rose with a startled cry. One or two women sat with white faces, as if stupefied by alarm, and two or three men got up hurriedly. Harding indistinctly recognized Colonel Mowbray among them.

"Be quick! Get hold of him!" he called to the nearest.

He was replaced by two willing helpers, and, half dazed and not knowing what to do, he slackly followed the others up the middle of the floor. All who were not needed stood watching them, for they made a

striking group as they moved slowly forward, carrying what seemed to be a shapeless bundle of snowy furs. Devine was white from head to foot, a bulky figure in his shaggy coat and cap, though the bent forms of the other men partly concealed him; Harding came alone, walking unsteadily, with the snow falling off him in glistening powder, his face haggard, and his frost-split lips covered with congealed blood.

As the little group passed on, following Gerald, Harding suddenly reeled, and, clutching at the back of a chair, fell into it with a crash. After that he was not sure of anything until some one brought him a glass of wine, and soon afterward Devine came back with Gerald.

"My mother begs you will excuse her, but she'll thank you before you go," he said. "The Colonel hopes to see you shortly, but he's busy with Lance, and we're fortunate in having a man who should have been a doctor. Now if you'll come with me, I'll give you a change of clothes. Your oxen are in the stable."

"We can't stay," remonstrated Harding.

"It's impossible for you to go home."

"That's true," said Devine, touching Harding's arm. "Better get up, Craig, before the snow melts on you."

Gerald gave them clothes, and then, saying that he was needed, left them alone. After they had changed, Devine found his way to the stable to see if the oxen were any the worse, and Harding went back to the hall. A group of men and women were talking in low voices, but no one spoke to him, and he sat down in

a corner, feeling awkward and uncomfortable in his borrowed garments. Evidently the Mowbrays had been entertaining some of their neighbors who, to judge by scraps of conversation he overheard, thought they would better take their leave but doubted if they could reach home. Harding knew that he could not do so, but he felt averse to accepting Mowbray's hospitality, and he feared that Hester would be anxious about his safety.

He was still sitting in the corner when Beatrice came up to him.

"I'm afraid you have been neglected, but you can understand that we are rather upset," she said.

"How is your brother?" Harding asked.

"Better than we thought at first. One of our friends has bandaged him. There are two ribs broken, but he declares he now feels fairly comfortable."

"I'm afraid he's exaggerating, but it's a good sign. Anyway, I'm glad to hear he's conscious."

"He was conscious before you brought him home. He says he tried to speak to you, but you didn't hear him."

"That's possible," Harding replied. "The trail wasn't very good — and we were busy."

Beatrice gave him a strange look.

"So one would imagine! There was probably no trail at all. Two of our friends who live half a mile off don't think they can get back. It's fortunate for us that you and your partner had the strength and courage ——"

"What could we do?" Harding asked. "You wouldn't have expected us to leave him in the bluff?"

Beatrice's eyes sparkled, and a flush of color crept

into her face. Harding thought she was wonderfully beautiful, and feared it was unwise to look at her lest he should make a fool of himself.

"I can't say that I wouldn't have expected you to give him your coat; but that was very fine of you," she said. "You must have known the risk you took. When you came in you looked worse than he did."

It struck Harding as significant that she should have noticed his appearance in the midst of her alarm; but it might not mean much, after all. Women were often more observant than men.

"Then I ought to have been ashamed. It was the shock we were afraid of. You see, after a bad accident there's often a collapse, and when one's in that state even moderate cold is dangerous."

"How do you know these things?" Beatrice asked.

"When you live as we do, you learn something about accidents," he answered.

Beatrice gave him a look that thrilled him.

"I promised Lance that I would not stay but a minute," she said; "but I will send Mr. Kenwyne to look after you." She added in a lower voice: "I have not attempted to thank you, but you must believe that we're very, very grateful."

Harding's eyes followed her across the room and lingered on her when she stopped a moment to speak with one of the neighbors. Kenwyne's voice at his elbow roused him.

"Colonel Mowbray expects you to remain here, but on the whole I think you'd better come with me," Kenwyne was saying. "They're naturally in some confusion, and my farm isn't very far. I think my team can make it."

Harding was glad to get away quietly, but he left a message that he hoped to call in the morning for his oxen and for news of Lance.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED ESCAPE

ON the morning after the accident Colonel Mowbray sat at breakfast with his wife and daughter. The gale had fallen in the night, and although the snow lay deep about the house, Gerald had already gone out with a hired man to see how the range horses, which were left loose in the winter, had fared during the storm. Lance was feverish, but there was nothing in his condition to cause anxiety, and he was in charge of a man whom some youthful escapade had prevented from obtaining a medical diploma. There were one or two others of his kind at Allenwood whose careers had been blighted by boyish folly. Breakfast had been well served, for everything went smoothly at the Grange; in spite of the low temperature outside, the room was comfortably warm, and the china and the table appointments showed artistic taste.

Colonel Mowbray looked thoughtfully stern.

"Perhaps it was as well Kenwyne took the Americans home last night," he remarked.

"You asked them to stay," Beatrice said, with more indignation than she cared to show; "and after what they did ——"

Mowbray cut her short.

"I cannot deny that we are heavily in their debt, and I shall take the first opportunity for thanking them.

In fact, if I can make any return in the shape of practical help, I shall be glad. All the same, to have had them here would have meant our putting them on a more intimate footing than might be wise."

Beatrice smiled, but said nothing. She respected her father, but the thought of his helping such a man as Harding was amusing.

"From what I've heard about Mr. Harding, I don't think he would have presumed upon it," Mrs. Mowbray replied. "Besides, it looks as if we owed Lance's life to him and his companion and I really don't see why you object to the man. Of course, it was tactless of him to plow up our trail, but he was within his rights."

Mowbray looked at her sharply. His wife was generally docile and seldom questioned his decisions, but she now and then showed an unexpected firmness.

"I don't object to him, personally. For that matter, I know very little about him, good or bad," he said; and his tone implied that he was not anxious to learn anything more. "It is rather what he stands for that I disapprove of."

"What does he stand for?"

"What foolish people sometimes call Progress — the taint of commercialism, purely utilitarian ideas; in short, all I've tried to keep Allenwood free from. Look at England! You know how the old friendly relations between landlord and tenant have been overthrown."

"I wonder whether they were always friendly?" Beatrice interposed.

"They ought to have been friendly, and in most of the instances I can think of they were. But what can

one expect when a rich tradesman buys up a fine estate, and manages it on what he calls 'business lines'? This must mean putting the screw of a merciless competition upon the farmer. On the other hand, you see men with honored names living in extravagant luxury without a thought of their duty to their land, gambling on the Stock Exchange — even singing in music halls. The country's in a bad way when you read of its old aristocracy opening hat shops."

"But what are the poor people to do if they have no money?" Beatrice asked.

"The point is that they're being ruined by their own folly and the chaotic way things have been allowed to drift; but the other side of the picture's worse. When one thinks of wealth and poverty jostling each other in the towns; oppressive avarice and sullen discontent instead of helpful cooperation! The community plundered by trusts! Industries wrecked by strikes! This is what comes of free competition and contempt for authority; and the false principle that a man must turn all his talents to the making of money is at the root of it all."

It was a favorite hobby of the Colonel's, and Mrs. Mowbray made no remark; but Beatrice was pleased to see that he had forgotten Harding.

"You would have made a good feudal baron," she said with a smile. "Your retainers wouldn't have had many real grievances, but you would always have been on the king's side."

"The first principle of all firm and successful government is that the king can do no wrong."

"We don't challenge it at Allenwood, and it really seems to work well," Beatrice answered lightly; and

then, because Mowbray insisted on formal manners, she turned to her mother. "And now, with your permission, I had better go to Lance."

When she left them Mowbray frowned.

"There's another matter I want to talk about," he said. "I'm inclined to think we'll have to do away with the card tables when the younger people spend the evening with us."

"But you're fond of a game!"

"Yes. I'll confess that a close game of whist is one of my keenest pleasures, and if I finish two or three dollars to the good it adds to the zest. For all that, one must be consistent, and I've grounds for believing there has been too much high play of late. The offenders will have to be dealt with if I can find them out."

Mrs. Mowbray knew that her husband's first object was the good of the settlement, and that he would make any personal sacrifice to secure it.

"We can have music, or get up a dance instead," she suggested; and added anxiously: "You don't think that Gerald ——"

"I'd have grave suspicions, only that he knows what to expect," Mowbray answered grimly. "Something might be learned from Lance, but it would not be fair to ask."

"He wouldn't tell," Mrs. Mowbray said stoutly, knowing her husband's sense of honor. "Do you think it's serious enough to be disturbed about?"

"I'm afraid so, although at the moment I can hardly judge. A game of cards in public, for strictly moderate points, or a small wager on a race, can do the boys

no harm; but as soon as the stake gets large enough to be worth winning for itself, it leads to trouble; and systematic, secret gambling is a dangerous thing. As a matter of fact, I won't have it at Allenwood. At present I can do nothing but keep a careful watch."

An hour later Mrs. Mowbray was sitting with Lance, when word was brought her that Harding had called.

"Let him come up here, if only for a minute," Lance begged.

"Well, but it must not be longer," his mother consented.

Harding bowed to her respectfully when he entered the room; then he turned to Lance with a smile.

"Glad to see you looking much better than I expected."

Lance gave him his hand, though he winced as he held it out, and his mother noticed Harding's quick movement to save him a painful effort. There was a gentleness that pleased her in the prairie man's face.

"I don't want to embarrass you, but you'll understand how I feel about what you did for me," said Lance. "I won't forget it."

"Pshaw!" returned Harding. "We all get into scrapes. I wouldn't be here now if other people hadn't dragged me clear of a mower-knife, and once out of the way of a locomotive when my team balked in the middle of the track."

"I don't suppose any of the fellows gave you his clothes with the thermometer at minus forty. But I won't say any more on that point. Was my horse killed?"

"On the spot!"

Lance looked troubled.

"Well, it was my own fault," he said slowly. "I was trying a new headstall, and I wasn't very careful in linking up the bit."

He began to talk about the latest types of harness, and listened with obvious interest to Harding's views on the subject, but after a while his voice grew feeble, and his mother interrupted.

"You'll come back and see me when I'm better, won't you?" he asked eagerly.

Harding made a vague sign of assent, and left the room with Mrs. Mowbray. When they reached the hall, she stopped him.

"You did us a great service last night — I can find no adequate way of expressing my gratitude," she said.

Harding saw that she had not spoken out of mere conventional politeness.

"I think you make too much of it. Certainly, it was fortunate we happened to come along; the rest followed. But I can understand how you feel — I had a good mother."

She was pleased by his reply, and she had watched him closely while he talked to Lance. The man was modest and yet quietly sure of himself. He had shown no awkwardness, and his rather formal deference to herself was flattering. She somehow felt that he would not have offered it solely on account of her station.

"I'm glad to see your son looking pretty bright," Harding went on.

"You roused him. He was very listless and heavy until you came."

"I'm afraid I talked too much; it's a way I sometimes have." Harding smiled. Then he looked at her directly. "He asked me to come back."

Mrs. Mowbray knew he was shrewd enough to take a hint, and that she could without discourtesy prevent his coming; still, she did not wish to do so. She had heard her husband's views, to which she generally deferred; but she liked Harding, and he had saved her son's life. Moreover, she had a suspicion that his influence would be good for the boy.

"I hope you will come whenever it pleases you," she said with quiet sincerity.

"It will please me very much. I'll make use of the privilege as long as he finds that I amuse him."

Harding went home with a feeling of half-exultant satisfaction. Lance, for whom he had a rather curious liking, had been unmistakably glad to see him and, what was more important, Mrs. Mowbray was now his friend. For all that, he knew that tact was needed: the Colonel, while no doubt grateful, did not approve of him, and he must carefully avoid doing anything that might imply a readiness to take advantage of the slight favor he had been granted. Harding was not an adventurer, and the situation was galling to his pride, but he was shrewd and was willing to make some sacrifice if it gave him an opportunity for seeing Beatrice.

When Harding returned a week later he met the girl for a few moments, and had to be content with this. Lance brightened up noticeably when he talked to him, and as he was leaving pressed him to come again; but the unqualified doctor, whom he met in the hall, did not seem satisfied with the patient's progress.

Harding waited for a while before he went back.

He found Mrs. Mowbray alone on his arrival, and thought she looked anxious when he asked how Lance was getting on.

"He doesn't seem to improve as quickly as he ought, and Mr. Carson's puzzled," she said. "He tells me the injury is not serious enough to account for my boy's low condition, but he keeps restless and feverish, and doesn't sleep." Then, after a moment, she added confidentially: "One could imagine that he has something on his mind."

"Have you any suspicion what it is?"

"No—" She hesitated. "That is, nothing definite; and as he has given me no hint, it's possible that I'm mistaken in thinking that he is disturbed. But you may go in; you seem to cheer him."

Harding pondered this. He had been used to people who expressed their thoughts with frank directness, but he saw that Mrs. Mowbray was of a different stamp. She was most fastidious, yet she had taken him into her confidence as far as her reserve permitted. After all, there were things which a boy would confess to a man outside his family sooner than to his mother.

"Well," he said as meaningly as he thought advisable, "I'll do what I can."

On entering the sick room he thought her anxiety was justified. Lance did not look well, although he smiled at his visitor.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "It's a change to see somebody fresh. The boys mean well but they worry me."

"You'd get tired of me if I came oftener," Harding answered with a laugh.

They talked for a few minutes about a sheep dog

that had been given to Lance; and then, during a slight pause, the boy closed his eyes with a sigh. Harding looked at him keenly.

"I'm told you're not sleeping well," he said; "and you don't look as fit as you ought. I guess lying on your back gets monotonous."

"Yes," Lance answered listlessly. "Then I'm worried about losing my horse."

"One feels that kind of thing, of course; but it wasn't an animal I'd get attached to. Hard in the mouth, I guess, a bad buck-jumper, and a wicked eye. On the whole, you're better off without him."

"Perhaps you're right, and I meant to sell him. I'd had offers, and the Warrior blood brings a long price."

"Ah! That means you wanted the money?"

Lance was silent for a few moments, and then he answered half resentfully:

"I did."

It was obvious to Harding that delicacy was required here. Mrs. Mowbray was right in her suspicions, but if he made a mistake Lance would take alarm. Harding feared, however, that tact was not much in his line.

"I am an outsider here," he said with blunt directness; "but perhaps that's a reason why you can talk to me candidly. It's sometimes embarrassing to tell one's intimate friends about one's troubles. Why did you want the money?"

Lance flushed and hesitated, but he gathered confidence from Harding's grave expression.

"To tell the truth, I'd got myself into an awkward mess."

"One does now and then. I've been fixed that way myself. Perhaps I can help."

"No; you can't," Lance said firmly. "All the same, it's a relief to take somebody into my confidence. Well, I owed a good deal of money; I'd been playing cards."

"Do you pay debts of that kind at once?"

"Of course. It's a matter of principle; though the boys wouldn't have pressed me."

"I'd have let them wait," said Harding. "But I don't play cards. I suppose you borrowed the money from somebody else, and he wants it back. Now the proper person for you to go to is your father."

Lance colored and hesitated again.

"I can't!" he blurted out with evident effort. "It's not because I'm afraid. He'd certainly be furious — I'm not thinking of that. There's a reason why it would hit him particularly hard. Besides, you know, we're far from rich."

Having learned something about Gerald Mowbray, Harding understood the lad's reticence. Indeed, he respected his loyalty to his brother.

"Very well. If you'll tell me what you owe, and where you got the money, I may suggest something."

He had expected Lance to refuse; but, worn by pain and anxious as he was, the boy was willing to seize upon any hope of escape. He explained his affairs very fully, and Harding made a note of the amount and of a name that was not unfamiliar to him.

When Lance finished his story and dropped back among his pillows with a flushed face, there was a short silence in the room.

Harding was not, as a rule, rashly generous; but he liked the boy, and Lance was Beatrice's brother — that in itself was a strong claim on him. Then, Mrs. Mow-

bray had been gracious to him; though he was a stranger and in a sense an intruder, she had taken him into her confidence, and he felt a deep respect for her. There was in his mind, however, no thought of profiting by the situation; indeed, he was frankly reluctant to part with money which could be better employed than in paying gambling debts.

"So you went to Davies, of Winnipeg — a mortgage broker?" he remarked. "Who told you about him? These fellows don't lend to people they know nothing about."

"A man introduced me," Lance said awkwardly; and Harding again suspected Gerald.

"When you signed his note for the sum you wanted, how much did you really get?"

Lance smiled ruefully as he told him.

"You seem to know their tricks," he added.

"Some of them," Harding replied dryly. "Now, if you'll give me your word that you won't stake a dollar on a horse or card again, I'll take up this debt; but I don't want your promise unless you mean to keep it."

Lance's eyes were eager, though his face was red.

"I've had my lesson. It was the first time I'd really played high, and I was a bit excited; the room was hot and full of smoke, and they'd brought in a good deal of whisky." Then he pulled himself up. "But I can't let you do this; and I don't see ——"

"Why I'm willing to help?" Harding finished for him. "Well, one's motives aren't always very plain, even to oneself. Still — you can take it that I've a pretty strong grievance against all mortgage brokers. They've ruined one or two friends of mine, and they're

going to make trouble in this country. I'll give you a few instances."

He meant to frighten the lad, but there was no need to overstate the truth, and his face grew stern as he related how struggling farmers had been squeezed dry, and broken in spirit and fortune by the money-lender's remorseless grasp. Lance was duly impressed, and realized how narrow an escape he had had.

"Are you willing to leave the thing entirely to me?" Harding concluded. "You must understand that you're only changing your creditor."

"I can trust you," Lance said with feeling. "I can't tell you what a relief it is to get out of that fellow's hands! But I ought to warn you that he's tricky; you may have some trouble."

Harding laughed as he stood up.

"Oh, I can deal with him. Now you go to sleep and don't worry any more."

After he left, Lance lay for a while thinking over the conversation. He was puzzled to know what had prompted Harding to come to his rescue. The Allenwood settlers had certainly been none too friendly to the prairie man, who was considered an outsider because he believed in work and in progress. Lance thought that there was no selfish motive in Harding's offer. What, then?

He suddenly shook off the thoughts and, reaching out to a table by his bedside, rang a small handbell there. Beatrice answered it.

"I want something to eat," he said petulantly. "Not slops this time; I'm tired of them."

His sister looked at him in surprise.

"Why, you wouldn't touch your lunch!"

"All the more reason I should want something now. You ought to be glad I'm getting better!"

Beatrice laughed.

"It's a very sudden improvement," she said. "Mr. Harding must be a magician. What has he done to you?"

"Harding knows a lot," Lance answered somewhat awkwardly; then added impulsively: "In fact, I think he's a remarkably fine fellow all round."

Beatrice opened her eyes wide. Such an opinion from the son of Colonel Mowbray was pure heresy; but she made no comment. She kissed Lance lightly on the forehead and tripped off downstairs to order some food for him.

Somehow, she was inclined to agree with her brother in his opinion of the prairie man.

CHAPTER IX

A MAN OF AFFAIRS

THE warmth of the big stove, which glowed a dull red in places, had melted holes in the frost that obscured the double windows of Davies' office, but icy draughts flowed round the room, and the temperature of the passage outside was down to zero. From where the stove-pipe pierced the wall, drops of a black distillate trickled down, and the office was filled with the smell of tar and hot iron. Rents gaped in the pine paneling, and the door had shrunk to a remarkably easy fit. The building was new, pretentious, and supposed to be centrally heated, but Winnipeg was then passing through the transition stage which occurs in the history of most Western towns: emerging from rude disorder with bold but badly guided striving toward beauty and symmetry. Civic ambition was poorly seconded by builder's skill, and the plans of aspiring architects were crudely materialized.

From where Davies sat he could look into the snowy street; the view was far from pleasing. The blackened wreck of a burnt-out store confronted the office block, and behind it straggled a row of squalid shacks. Farther on rose a wall of concrete with rusty iron framing sticking out of it; and a mound of cut stone and sawed lumber, left as it lay when the frost stopped work, encroached upon the plank sidewalk. Davies, however, was not engrossed in the view, though he had lent

money upon some adjacent building lots. A survey map of the Allenwood district lay on his table, and he alternately studied it and gazed out of the window with a thoughtful air.

The Allenwood soil was good, consisting, as it did for the most part, of stiff black gumbo; it was well watered and fairly well wooded; and it occupied the center of a fertile belt. Its position had other natural advantages, and the configuration of the country made it probable that with the first railroad extension a line would run past the settlement to the American frontier. Davies had reason to believe that his view was shared by far-seeing railroad directors; but, whether the line were run or not, the Allenwood farms would rise in value. Davies wanted a hold on the settlement; and he had, to some extent, succeeded in getting it. He held a mortgage on Gerald Mowbray's homestead; it seemed possible to get the younger brother into his power; and he was negotiating with another embarrassed settler. On the other hand, money was tight just then, and Davies' schemes were hampered by a lack of capital. He had written to Lance Mowbray, pressing for some interest that was overdue, and when the lad begged for time had curtly summoned him to Winnipeg. Now he was expecting him, for the eastbound train had arrived.

He heard steps in the passage and looked up with some surprise as two men entered his office. Their bronzed faces and their cheap skin coats suggested that they worked upon the land, but there was something in the expression and bearing of the taller man that contradicted this. Davies was a judge of character, and he read that something as a sense of power.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said, with a suave smile. "I don't believe I have an appointment with you, but I'm always open for business."

"My name is Harding," said the taller man; "and this is my partner, Mr. Devine. You were expecting Lance Mowbray, of Allenwood; I've come instead."

Davies would have preferred dealing with young Mowbray himself; this substitute made him feel somewhat uneasy. After careful inquiries into Mowbray's affairs, Davies did not expect to get the overdue interest. What he wanted was to renew the loan at a higher rate as the price of waiting.

Harding got down to business at once.

"Mowbray owes you some interest; I've come to pay it."

Davies' eyes narrowed.

"Rather a long and expensive journey, if that was all that brought you," he said with a sneer. "A check would have done."

"You seemed to think an interview needful; and I don't propose to bear the cost," Harding answered quietly. "Anyway, now that I'm here I'll pay up the principal, if we can come to terms."

"There are no terms to be arranged. I'll settle the account on receipt of the sum Mowbray borrowed and the interest."

"I'll give you what he got," said Harding coolly.

Davies pondered a moment. The offer had been a shock to him, for it suggested that Mowbray had found a way of escape. That meant that his hold on Allenwood would be weakened. Harding looked shrewd and businesslike; there was little possibility of hoodwinking such a man.

"Do you expect me to abandon my rights?" he asked.

"I'm here to look after Mowbray's. You charged him what you call expenses, which you didn't incur. Guess you'll have to prove them if you take the case to court."

"One has to make inquiries about the security when lending money."

"As a matter of fact, you knew the security was bad. Mowbray told you that his land was held in trust until he was twenty-one. What you traded on was his fear of the deal coming to his people's knowledge. I guess his brother gave you all the information you required."

Davies' start indicated that the shot, made at a venture, had reached its mark. He grew angry, but he quickly saw that this was no time to lose his temper.

"It's a pretty cool proposition you make," he said.

"It's fair, and I don't press you to agree. Stick to your full claim, if you like, and you'll get your interest on what you actually lent, but on nothing more until payment of the principal is due. Then we'll give you all the trouble we can. But your hold on the boy is gone now that you know the money's ready."

Davies was forced to recognize that his debtor had escaped him; and, as it happened, he was pressed for money.

"Well," he conceded, "it's a small matter, after all. I'll give you a receipt if you'll put down the amount."

"I'd rather my bank paid this; it keeps a record. Then I want Mowbray's note as well as the receipt."

Harding handed him a check, and Davies looked at it in surprise.

"You have made another deduction!"

"Certainly. You demanded an interview, and I've knocked off my fare to Winnipeg. Now where's the note?"

Davies produced it, and then looked at him with an ironical grin.

"It's all straight, and I hope you're satisfied. A farmer, aren't you? May I suggest that you have mistaken your profession?"

Harding laughed good-naturedly as he pocketed the papers.

"I don't know. My belief is that a farmer doesn't lose anything by studying business methods."

When they reached the street, Harding turned to Devine.

"I've learned something I wanted to know," he said. "That fellow has a mortgage on Gerald Mowbray's land. He's playing a deep game."

"I don't see what he's getting after."

"Allenwood. It's worth plotting for."

"I guess he'd find the Colonel a pretty big obstacle. Anyway, it's not our business."

"No," Harding replied with a thoughtful air. "As far as I can see at present, it's not my business. . . . Now we'll look up the steam-plow man."

They found the implement dealer disengaged, and spent the afternoon in his store before Harding, who insisted upon several variations in the standard design, finally ordered a steam gang-plow. The agent was struck by the aptness of many of Harding's suggestions about improvements, and he invited the men to his hotel for the evening. When they parted he frankly admitted that he had picked up some useful hints. He

also surmised that Harding had learned all that was worth knowing about new machines.

The two men left Winnipeg the next day, and Devine went to report to Hester while Harding stopped at the Grange to see Lance.

The boy greeted him eagerly, and his eyes glistened with relief when Harding handed him the papers.

"I'll square it off, every dollar, as soon as I can," he said. "In fact, I feel so much about it that I can't express myself — if you'd been in my place, you would understand. I see he didn't claim all my note called for. How did you beat him down?"

"I knew the man I had to deal with," Harding smiled. "What you have to do is to keep clear of debt in future."

"I've given you my word; but I can't get out of debt to you." Lance looked at him with frank admiration. "You beat the fellow at his own game!" he exclaimed.

Harding held out his hand.

"I must go now," he said; "I promised to meet Kenwyne and Broadwood. We'll settle how you're to pay me the next time I come."

Mrs. Mowbray was waiting for him in the hall below.

"I want to thank you," she said to him. "I don't know what you have done to my boy, but he is so very much better."

Harding met the gaze she quietly fixed on him. He saw that she knew there was some secret between him and her son, but had confidence enough to ask no questions.

"For one thing," he answered lightly, "I've given him some good advice, which I think he'll act on."

"He seems to have a respect for your judgment — and I feel he's not mistaken."

"That's very kind," said Harding. "I hope I shall be able to keep your good opinion; though you may find it shaken by and by."

Mrs. Mowbray looked at him keenly, and then laid her hand gently on his arm.

"You have helped my boy to get better and, whatever may happen, that goes a long way," she said.

When Harding left her he felt that in Mrs. Mowbray he would have a staunch ally in his fight for Beatrice.

He returned to the Grange one afternoon about a week later, and found Beatrice alone. Lance, after his long confinement, had gone for his first drive, and his mother had accompanied him to see that he kept the robes properly wrapped about him. The Colonel and Gerald were at a neighbor's.

Beatrice gave him her hand cordially.

"I am glad of this opportunity for seeing you alone, because there's something I want to ask of you," she said.

"I shall do anything I can to please you."

"It's really something I want you not to do."

"Ah!" Harding smiled. "That's often harder."

They had entered a room which Beatrice and her mother used. It was not large, and it was scantily furnished, but most of the articles it contained, though worn and battered, were good. Curtains, rugs, and chairs were of artistic design, and their faded coloring was harmonious. By contrast with the rude prairie homesteads he had lived in, all that Harding

saw struck a note of luxurious refinement. What was more, the room seemed somehow stamped with its occupants' character. Colonel Mowbray, he knew, seldom entered it; it was the retreat of the two delicate, high-bred women he admired. He felt it was a privilege to be there. The unusual surroundings reacted upon him, and emphasized in a curious way his companion's grace and charm.

For a few moments after they were seated, Beatrice was silent, gazing thoughtfully before her. Her hair shone where the light touched it, and reminded Harding of the glitter of a prairie lake on a breezy, sunny day; her face was in profile, its fine chiseling forced up by a faded purple curtain behind her, which harmonized agreeably with the straw-colored dress that fell about her figure in graceful lines. As it happened, Beatrice was feeling somewhat embarrassed. She had a favor to ask, and she shrank with unusual timidity from placing herself in the man's debt. She believed that he had saved her brother's life and afterward rendered him some valuable service; but he had done this of his own accord, and it would be different were he to comply with her request.

"You have been urging some plans on Kenwyne and Broadwood," she began.

"You have heard about that! However, they didn't need urging; they agreed with me about the necessity for the thing."

"It's possible." There was a touch of haughtiness in Beatrice's tone. "Ralph Kenwyne has always been something of a revolutionary; and we know where Broadwood gets his ideas."

"From his wife? You can't expect me to condemn them. She was brought up as I was and thinks as I do."

Beatrice saw she was not beginning well and changed her ground.

"After all, that's not an important point. I suppose you know my father is bitterly opposed to your plans?"

"I was afraid so. It's unfortunate."

"Then can't you see that it would be better to give them up?"

Harding felt disturbed but determined. He was keenly anxious to please the girl, but to yield in this matter would be to act against his principles. She did not know what she was asking.

"No," he said; "I can't see that."

"Do you consider it good taste to encourage our friends to thwart their acknowledged leader?"

"It looks bad, as you put it," Harding replied. "For all that, a leader's business is to lead. He can't keep his followers standing still when they want to move on. Their wishes must be respected. Despotic authority's out of date."

"What is the use of choosing a ruler if he isn't to be obeyed?" she said haughtily.

"It sounds logical," Harding replied; "but it doesn't always work."

Beatrice was struggling hard with her wounded pride. Although on the whole broadminded, she had inherited some of the convictions of her caste; and, being the only daughter of the head of the settlement, she had been treated with more deference by the men at Allenwood than was perhaps good for her. It had

cost her an effort to ask a favor from Harding, but she had not doubted the result, and his refusal was a shock. That the man who now proved obdurate had boldly shown his admiration for her, made it worse. Yet, because she believed her cause was good, she determined to disregard her injured feelings.

"If you persist in your plans, it will hurt Colonel Mowbray, and lead to dissention here," she argued. "Why must you try to bring in these changes? We have done very well as we are."

He rose and stood with his hand on a chair-back, looking steadily at her; and she noticed with half-grudging approval the strength of his figure and the resolution in his quiet, brown face.

"The trouble is that you can't continue as you are. Allenwood's threatened from outside, and I'm not sure it's safe within."

"Is that your business?"

The cold pride in her tone hurt, for it implied that she regarded him as an intruding stranger.

"In a way, yes; but we'll let that drop. If I could have pleased you by giving up a personal advantage, I'd have gladly done so; but this is a bigger thing. It isn't a matter of being content with a smaller crop; it's letting land that was meant to be worked lie idle, wasting useful effort, and trying to hold up a state of things that can't last. If I give way, I'll be going back on all I believe in and betraying a trust."

Beatrice laughed scornfully; and saw him wince.

"I want you to understand what's behind this movement," he continued gravely. "Your people can't keep Allenwood for a place of amusement much longer, and some of those who see this have asked my help.

I've promised and I can't draw back. Besides, to break new soil and raise good wheat where only the wild grasses grow is the work I was meant for; the one thing worth while I'm able to do. I'd feel mean and ashamed if I held off and let the waste go on."

"Of course, it would be too great a sacrifice to make for a prejudiced old man, who has nevertheless always placed the good of Allenwood first, and an inexperienced, sentimental girl!"

Harding flushed at the taunt. It was very hard to displease her, but he would not be justified in giving way, and he thought that later, when she understood better, she would not blame him for being firm. Moreover, his temper was getting short.

"That's neither kind nor fair," he said. "Separate or together, your people and I must move on. We can't stand still, blocking the way, and defying Nature and the ordered procession of things. This land was made for the use of man, and he must pay with hard work for all it gives him."

"I am sorry you take that view; but there seems nothing further to be said." She rose as she spoke. "I'm afraid it's impossible that we should agree."

He left at once, and drove home in a downcast mood. No doubt, he had disappointed her badly. He had not even had the tact to make his refusal graceful; she must think him an iconoclastic boor, driven by a rude hatred of all that she respected. Still, he had tried to be honest; he could not shirk the task he was clearly meant to do. The struggle, however, had tried him hard, and he drove with set lips and knitted brows across the great white waste, oblivious of the biting cold.

CHAPTER X

THE CASTING VOTE

IT was a bitter evening. The snow on the crests of the rises glittered like steel; the hollows were sharply picked out in blue. The frost was pitiless, and a strong breeze whipped up clouds of dry snow and drove them in swirls across the plain. A half moon, harshly bright, hung low above the western horizon, and the vast stretch of sky that domed in the prairie was sprinkled with stars.

Harding and Devine were on their way to attend a council meeting at the Grange, Wrapped, as they were, in the thick driving-robe, with their fur caps pulled well down, they could not keep warm. The cold of the icy haze seemed to sear the skin. Harding's woolen-mittened hand was numbed on the reins, and he feared that it was getting frostbitten.

"It's fierce to-night," Devine remarked. "Do you think there'll be a good turn-out of the Allenwood boys?"

"The cold won't stop them. I expect the Colonel has sent round to whip them up."

"I guess you're right. Do you know, now that I've met one or two of them I see something in you and Hester that's in them. Can't tell you what it is, but it's there, and it was plainer in your father. What are they like when you get to know them?"

"Much the same as the rest of us."

"The rest of us! Then you don't claim to be different from the general prairie crowd?"

Harding frowned.

"I suppose I wouldn't mind being thought the best farmer in the district," he said; "but that's all the distinction I care about."

"You'll get that easy enough. You've gone ahead fast, Craig, and you're going farther; but you may have some trouble on the way. When a man breaks a new trail for himself and leaves other men behind, it doesn't make them fond of him."

"Oh, I have no delusions on that point. To attain success, one cannot hope to travel a balmy road."

"Why do you want to rope in the Allenwood boys?" Devine asked curiously.

"The reason's plain. You and I might make the steam-plow pay, but the price is high, and we can't do much more alone. If you want the best economy in farming, you must have cooperation. It's easier to buy expensive tools if you divide the cost."

"I see that. But have you no other reason? You don't feel that you'd like to make friends with these people and, so to speak, have them acknowledge you?"

"No," said Harding firmly. Since his talk with Beatrice he had felt a curious antagonism to the whole Allenwood settlement.

It was too cold to talk much, and the men drove on in silence until the lights of the Grange twinkled out across the plain. Ten minutes later they entered the big hall, and Harding cast a quick glance about. He noticed the clusters of wheat-ears and the big moose-heads on the wall, the curious Eastern weapons and the

English sporting guns that glistened beneath them, and the fine timbering of the pointed roof. He did not think there was another homestead to compare with this between Winnipeg and the valleys of British Columbia; but it was the company that seized his attention. It looked as if every man in the settlement were present; and they were worth the glance he gave them. Dressed with picturesque freedom, they were, for the most part, handsome men, with powerful frames and pleasant, brown faces. Harding knew they had courage and intelligence, yet he felt that there was something lacking — something hard to define. He thought of them as without the striving spirit; as too content.

One or two gave him a welcoming smile, and there was a slight general movement when he sat down. Mowbray, however, looked up with some surprise from the head of the long table.

"After certain favors Mr. Harding has done me, it would be singularly inappropriate if I questioned his coming here as my guest. On the other hand, the presence of any outside person at our council is irregular."

"May I explain?" Kenwyne said. "Mr. Harding and his partner came by my invitation to give us some information about matters of which he knows more than any one else. They will, of course, take no other part in the proceedings."

Mowbray bowed. "I am satisfied. Mr. Harding will understand that a president must show due regard to form."

His manner was courteous, yet Harding was conscious of a subtle antagonism between them. To some extent, it was personal, but its roots struck deeper; it

was the inevitable hostility between the old school and the new. Mowbray was a worthy representative of the former. Fastidiously neat in his dress, though his clothes were by no means of the latest cut, and sitting very upright, he had an air of dignity and command. He might be prejudiced, but it was obvious that he was neither dull nor weak.

"We have," he said, taking up a paper, "a motion of some importance before us. It is proposed that we consider the advisability of cooperating with Messrs. Harding and Devine: first, in the purchase and use of a steam-plow; second, in the organization of a joint creamery; and, third, in opening a sales office in Winnipeg or other convenient center for the disposal of stock and general produce."

Putting down the paper he looked round with an ironical smile.

"You will observe that the scheme is by no means modest; indeed, it strikes me as the most revolutionary project that has ever been suggested in this place. It is nevertheless my duty to ask those responsible for it to say what they can in its favor."

Kenwyne rose with a composed expression.

"Briefly, the advantages are these. With mechanical power we can plow more land than at present and at a reduced cost."

"That is far from certain," Mowbray declared. "We cannot take it for granted. These machines go wrong."

"With your permission, I will ask Mr. Harding to give us some figures later. We are missing opportunities by being content with rearing only a limited number of beef cattle. Winnipeg and Brandon are growing

fast; new towns are springing up along the railroad, and there will soon be a demand for dairy produce that will counterbalance the rather frequent loss of a wheat crop."

"It will mean more paid hands and working all the land," some one objected.

"Exactly. I may add that this is our aim. The land must be developed."

There was a murmur of disapproval, but Kenwyne went on.

"Then there is reason to believe that we seldom obtain the prices we ought to get. Stockbuyers' profits and salesmen's charges are high, and we can't expect these gentry to look after *our* interests. We could best secure these by setting up an agency of our own, and hiring trained assistance. I'm afraid we cannot claim to be successful business men."

"If that claim is ever justified, you will have to choose another leader," Mowbray remarked. "This settlement was not founded with the object of making money. Now, Broadwood!"

Broadwood rose with a smile.

"We must all agree, sir, that there's not much danger of the object you mention being realized. No doubt, there are some to whom this doesn't matter, but the rest are confronted with the necessity for making a living, and I suspect that one or two have the trouble I've experienced in paying my storekeepers' bills."

"Don't be personal!" some one called out.

"That strikes me as foolish," Broadwood retorted. "One can't help being personal. We all know one another; we use one another's horses and borrow one another's cash; and it's the necessity for doing the latter

that I wish to obviate. We all know our neighbors' needs, and I want to show you how they can be supplied."

He had struck the right note with his easy humor; but Harding saw that Mowbray was not pleased.

"*You* don't need much," one cried amid laughter. "You got a bumper harvest, and cut down your subscription to the hounds."

Broadwood smiled.

"I came out of the rut and worked. A rash experiment, perhaps, but it didn't prove so harrowing as I feared; and there's some satisfaction in having no debts. But my point is that you can't do much without proper implements, and I feel that we'll have to get them. The proposal I've the pleasure of seconding, shows you how."

He sat down, and Mowbray looked up with a sarcastic smile.

"Broadwood's remarks don't take us much farther; he seems careful to avoid practical details. Now the first thing I notice about this scheme is that it is founded on combination. Its proposers are right in assuming the necessity for this, if their purpose is to secure economical success; but such success can be bought at too high a price. Carry the cooperative idea out to its logical conclusion, and a man becomes a machine. He must subordinate his private judgment, he cannot choose his course, all his movements must be regulated by central control. Then you may get efficiency, but you destroy character, independence, personal responsibility, all the finest attributes of human nature. You may object that I am exaggerating; that

nobody wants this. The danger is that if you decide to go some distance, you may be driven farther than you think. Then, Allenwood was founded to encourage individual liberty — that settlers here might live a healthy life, free from economic pressure; on their own land, farming it like gentlemen, and not with bitter greed; enjoying the wind and sunshine, finding healthy sport. We demand a high standard of conduct, but that is all. We are bound to one another by community of ideals and traditions, and not by the hope of dividends."

There was an outbreak of applause; then Kenwyne rose.

"The difficulty is that to lead our own lives, regardless of changing times and in defiance of commercial principles, needs larger means than most of us possess. The plain truth is that Allenwood has been living upon its capital, drawing upon resources that cannot be renewed, and we must presently face the reckoning. Some of us see this clearly, and I think the rest are beginning to understand. If you have no objections, sir, I will ask Mr. Harding to give us some figures."

Harding got up and stood silent for a moment or two, conscious that all present were watching him. He felt that they were keeping the ring, and that the affair had developed into a fight between himself and Mowbray. Harding regretted this, because the Colonel's hostility would make the secret hope he cherished very difficult to realize; but he could not act against his convictions. He stood for progress — blundering progress, perhaps — and Mowbray for the preservation of obsolete ways and means; the conflict was inevi-

table. Harding might lose the first round, but he knew that the result was certain. Vast, insuperable forces were arrayed against his antagonist.

"To begin with, what do you expect to gain by persuading us to join you?" Mowbray asked.

"A saving of expense and the help of the only neighbors I have at present," Harding answered. "My partner and I are ready to go on alone, but we can't hope to do much unassisted."

Opening the papers he had brought, he read out particulars of the cost of plowing by horses and by steam; then statistics of American and Canadian grain production and the fluctuations of prices.

"Where did you get the figures about the mechanical plowing?" Mowbray asked in an ironical tone. "From the makers?"

"In the first place. I afterward checked them by information from farmers who have used the machines."

"Very wise! These implements are expensive. Can you guarantee that they will work satisfactorily?"

"That would be rash. I expect a certain amount of trouble."

"Skilled mechanics' wages are high. Do you recommend our keeping a man here in case things go wrong?"

"Certainly not! If you buy a steam-plow, you must learn to keep it in order."

Broadwood, picturing the Colonel sprawled under an oily engine, battling with obstinate bolts, laughed aloud.

Mowbray frowned.

"Granting the accuracy of your statistics," he said,

" you seem to have proved the economy of mechanical power, when used on a large scale. But we are not agreed upon the necessity for such a thing."

This was the opening Harding had waited for and he seized it quickly.

" At present wheat is your mainstay. How many of you will find it profitable to grow at the current price? "

" Not many, perhaps," Mowbray admitted; and the disturbed expression of others bore out the statement. " But is there adequate ground for concluding it will remain at an abnormally low price? "

" It will not remain there. For the next few years it will go down steadily."

There was a murmur of disagreement; and Mowbray smiled.

" I presume you are willing to justify this gloomy forecast? " he said.

" I'll try," answered Harding. " You have seen what one railroad has done for Western Canada. It has opened up the country, brought wide tracts of land into cultivation, and largely increased the wheat crop. That increase will go on, and you will presently see rival lines tapping new belts of fertile soil."

" But do you imply that the grain output of Western Canada can force down prices? " a man asked with a scornful laugh. " We have all Europe for a market. I imagine they'll use what we can send them in a few big English towns."

It was obvious that the question met with approval, and Harding quietly searched the faces turned toward him. He belonged by right of birth to these men's caste, but he did not want them to own him. He asked

their help, but he could do without it, though they could not dispense with his. Their supineness irritated him; they would not see the truth that was luminously clear. He felt a strange compulsion to rouse and dominate them.

"The Canadian output will soon have to be reckoned with," he said. "In the meantime, it's the effect of a general expansion throughout the world that I'm counting on. What has been done in Canada is being done everywhere. Look abroad and see! The American middle West linked up with new railroads, grain pouring out to New York and Baltimore; Californian wheat shipments doubling, and the Walla country in Oregon all one grain belt. They're tapping new soil in Argentina; Australia and Chile are being exploited wherever they get rain; and British irrigation works in Egypt and India will have their effect."

Gerald Mowbray spoke for the first time.

"One feels tempted to inquire where Mr. Harding secured this mass of information?" he said, with a slight curl of his lips.

"You can get a good deal for a few dollars' subscription to New York papers," Harding answered dryly. "When the snow's deep, men with no amusements have time to read. But that's beside the question. I must now ask you to consider the improvement in transport. Locomotives are doubling their size and power; you have seen the new grain cars. The triple-expansion engine is cutting down ocean freight, making distance of no account. All countries must compete in the world's markets with the cheapest grower. To survive in the struggle that's coming, one must use efficient tools."

"And what will happen after the markets have been flooded?" a man asked derisively.

"Then," said Harding gravely, "when the slack and careless have been killed off there will be a startling change. The farming expansion can't last; there's not enough accessible virgin land to draw upon. American shipments will fall off; the demands of the world's growing population will overtake the supply. Those who live through the fight will find riches thrust upon them."

"We are losing sight of the general produce and dairy scheme," Mowbray remarked. "Have you anything to tell us on this point?"

"Not much. Winnipeg is growing, so is Brandon, and they'll provide good markets for farming truck; but the country that will ask for most is British Columbia."

"Rather a long way off!" somebody commented.

"Wait and see," said Harding. "They're opening new mines and sawmills all over the province; Columbia's aim is industrial, not agricultural, and most of the land there is rock and forest. They're cut off from the Pacific States by the tariff, and naturally they'll turn to us across the Rockies. I foresee our sending general produce west instead of east. Now, although I've taken up too much time, will you give me a minute to read some figures?"

He paused, and with an almost involuntary burst of applause they bade him go on. The statistics he gave were telling, clinching his arguments, and when he sat down there was a deep murmur of approval from opponents as well as friends. The breadth of his views and his far-reaching knowledge appealed to them. It

was the first time they had heard anything like this at Allenwood.

After waiting a few moments for silence, Mowbray turned to Devine.

"Have you anything of interest to tell us?"

"Well," Devine said with simple earnestness, "I was raised at a prairie homestead. I began to drive horses soon after I could walk, and ever since I've been living on the soil. That's how I know that in the long run scratch-farming will never pay. With Nature up against us, we can take no chances when we break new land, for she's mighty hard to beat, with her dry seasons, harvest frost, blight, and blowing sand. We've got to use the best of everything man can invent and, if we're to stand for a run of bad times, get the last cent's value for every dollar. Any machine that won't give you the top output must be scrapped: you must get your full return for your labor. Slouching and inefficiency lead you straight into the hands of the mortgage man."

When he sat down, Mowbray smiled.

"Our visitors have certainly given us food for thought," the Colonel said. "I offer them our thanks, and should now be glad to hear any fresh opinions."

Several men spoke; some with warmth and some with careless humor.

"As we don't get much further, we will take a vote," Mowbray suggested. "I will move the resolution as it stands. Though this has not been our usual custom, you are entitled to a ballot."

There was silence for a moment. Mowbray's views were known, and the men shrank from wounding him, for he did not bear opposition well. For all that, with

a fastidious sense of honor, they disdained the shield of the secret vote.

"I think we will stick to the show of hands," Kenwyne replied.

"Very well," said Mowbray. "For the motion!"

Harding, glancing round the room, was surprised and somewhat moved to notice that Lance's hand went up among the rest. The boy had voted against his father. So far as Harding could judge, half the men were in favor of the scheme.

"Against the motion!"

The hands were raised, and Mowbray counted them with care.

"Equal, for and against," he announced. "I have a casting vote, and I think the importance of the matter justifies my using it. I declare the motion lost."

There was an impressive silence for a few moments; then Broadwood spoke.

"Although we have decided against going on with the scheme, as a body, I take it there is nothing to prevent any individuals who wish to do so joining in Mr. Harding's venture?"

"I must leave you to decide how far such action is in good taste, or likely to promote the harmony which has been the rule at Allenwood. Now I think we can close the meeting."

When the company dispersed, Harding, Devine, and Broadwood drove home with Kenwyne. The Scotch housekeeper opened the door for them, and handed Kenwyne the mail which had been brought in his absence. He tore open a newspaper and turned to the quotations.

"Wheat down sixpence a quarter at Liverpool," he

said. "It will have its effect in Chicago and Winnipeg." He dropped the paper and took off his fur coat. "I suppose you're going on with the plan, Harding?"

"The plow's ordered."

"You're a hustler," Broadwood laughed; "but you mustn't make the pace too hot. We've been used to going steady. What did you think of the meeting?"

"It went better than I expected."

"We'd have had a majority only that they were afraid of the Colonel; and I don't blame them. In a way, he made a rather pathetic figure, trying to sweep back the tide. The old man has courage; it's a pity he won't see that his is a lost cause."

"He can't," said Kenwyne gravely; "and we must realize that."

"Then are you going to let him ruin you?" Devine asked.

"I hope not; but we all feel that we can't disown our leader," Broadwood answered. "I dare say you can understand that we have a hard row to hoe."

"Well, the creamery scheme will have to be dropped," Kenwyne said; "but there'll be plenty of work for the new plow."

"Yes," Harding replied. "If all the rest stand out. Devine and I can keep it busy."

"How much land do you intend to break?"

Harding told him, and Kenwyne looked astonished.

"You're a bold man. If it's not an impertinence, can you finance the thing?"

"It will take every dollar I have."

"And if you lose? The spring rains are sometimes hard enough to uproot the young blades; or a summer hailstorm or drought may come and ruin the crop."

Harding shrugged his shoulder.

" Those things must be considered, of course. But one never gets very far by standing still and waiting for a disaster that may never occur. ' Nothing ventured, nothing gained,' " he quoted with a smile.

CHAPTER XI

THE STEAM PLOW

THE winter passed quickly. Harding was kept fully occupied; for there was cordwood to be cut, there were building logs to be got ready, and the fitting up of the new house kept him busy at his carpenter's bench. He was used to the prairie climate, and he set off cheerfully at dawn to work in the snow all day, returning at dark, half-frozen and stiff from swinging the heavy ax. Now and then he drove Hester to Mrs. Broadwood's, or spent an evening with one or two others of the Allenwood settlers. He went partly for his sister's sake, but also because he sometimes met Beatrice at his new friends' houses, and since Lance had recovered he no longer had an excuse for visiting the Grange. Mrs. Mowbray had always been gracious, but he knew that the Colonel now regarded him as a dangerous person.

Beatrice's manner puzzled him. As a rule, she was friendly, yet he could not flatter himself that he was making much progress, and sometimes she was distinctly aloof. He might have placed a favorable interpretation upon her reserve, but unfortunately it was tinged with what looked very much like hostility. Harding imagined that she was influenced by her father; and he was troubled.

There were, however, days when his homestead

rocked beneath the icy blast, while the snow lashed the ship-lap walls, and to venture out involved serious risk. The blizzards were often followed by bitter evenings when the prairie lay white and silent in the Arctic frost, and no furs would protect one against the cold. At such times, Harding sat quietly by the red-hot stove, sometimes with a notebook in his hand, and sometimes merely thinking hard. Many barriers stood between him and the girl he loved, and, being essentially practical, he considered how he could remove the worst. Beatrice had been luxuriously brought up, and he must have material advantages to offer her; although if she were what he believed, she would not attach undue importance to them. He was ambitious and generally ready to take a risk, but now he was staking his all on an abundant crop. It could not be done rashly. Adverse contingencies must be foreseen and guarded against; all the precautions that experience dictated must be taken. He would be ruined if he lost.

The days were lengthening, though the frost still held, when his steam-plow arrived at the railroad settlement. No one seemed willing to undertake its transport to Allenwood; and when a thing was extremely difficult Harding believed in doing it himself. The machine had been dismantled, but some of the engine-castings were massive, and the boiler, with its large, wood-burning firebox was of considerable weight. It must, however, be moved at once, because the frost might break, and the prairie is impassable by loaded vehicles for a few weeks after the thaw. As a rule, the snowfall is light on the Western plains, and jumper-sleds are not in general use. In this instance Harding found the long, high-wheeled wagon suit his purpose

best, and he carefully strengthened one before he set off to bring home the plow.

It was not an easy task. The high plain sloped to the railroad in wave-like undulations, with sandy crests and timber in the hollows. In summer, it would hardly have been possible to haul the plow across this belt of broken country, but the few inches of beaten snow on the trail simplified the task. For all that, Harding spent several days on the road, moving the machine in detachments, until he came to the boiler, which must be handled in one piece. When, with the help of several train-men, he got it into his wagon, he knew his troubles had begun.

Leaving the settlement at dawn with Devine, they camped at sunset by a frozen creek and got a few hours' sleep beside a fire until the cold awakened them. After this, Harding lay thinking over the next day's work until the sky began to whiten in the east, and it was time to get breakfast.

They set off in the stinging cold while the crimson sunrise glared across the snow, but it was afternoon and the teams were worn out when they approached the ravine a few miles from home. This, they knew, presented their greatest obstacle. The frost held, sky and air were clear, and a nipping wind had risen. As they drew near the wavy line of trees that marked the edge of the dip, Harding was not pleased to notice a group of people. He had arranged for two of the Allenwood men to meet him with some tackle, but he saw that Hester, Beatrice, Mrs. Broadwood, and several more had accompanied them. He was not often self-conscious, but when he had anything difficult to do he did not like onlookers. They embarrassed him.

For all that, he felt a keen thrill of pleasure when Beatrice, with Mrs. Broadwood, came toward him when he stopped his team on the edge of the hollow. The sides of the ravine were clothed with leafless poplars, and the snow shone a soft gray-blue in their shadow. In places, the slope was very steep, and the trail, with several awkward bends, ran down diagonally to the bridge at the bottom, shut in by rows of slender trunks except where the ground fell away on its outer edge. A thin cloud of steam hung over the jaded horses. Except for the sparkle in his eyes, Harding had a very tired look when Beatrice stopped beside him.

"It will not be easy getting down," she said.

Harding smiled.

"I suppose I deserve some trouble?"

"I really think you do," Beatrice answered with a laugh. "I would have stopped you if I could; but now the plow's here, it's too late to be disagreeable about it — so I don't wish you any difficulty in getting down!"

"It's a sensible attitude. Fight against a thing you don't like, but make the best of it when it's an accomplished fact."

"I don't like steam-plows at Allenwood," said Beatrice with a flush of color.

"Allenwood is hifalutin," Mrs. Broadwood put in. "They're trying to run it on ideals."

"Is it necessary to separate ideals from practical efficiency?" Harding asked.

"They don't often go together," Beatrice answered scornfully.

"There's some truth in that. But it's the fault of human nature; you can't blame the machines."

"The machines are to be admired," the girl returned. "One blames the men who use them with the wrong object."

Harding smiled; but before he could answer, Broadwood came up with Kenwyne to announce that everything was ready.

"You'll have to be careful," he warned Harding. "We'll lock the back wheels before we hook on the tackles. Will you let the front team loose?"

"No; I may want them to swing me round the bends. First of all, I'll take a look at what you've done."

He walked down the trail with them and examined the fastenings of a big iron block through which ran a wire rope with a tackle at one end.

"The clevis is rather small, but it's the strongest I could find," Kenwyne said.

A little farther on they stopped where the bank fell nearly perpendicularly for some distance below the outer edge of the road.

"We banked the snow up here and beat it firm," he pointed out. "For all that, it would be wise to keep well to the inside."

"We'll shift the tackle when I get to the bend above," Harding replied, and went down to the bridge. It was rudely built of logs and had no parapet.

"I found the turn awkward the last time, but I see you have made it a bit easier," he said. "Well, we'd better make a start."

Lance and one or two others joined them when they reached the top. Harding examined the wagon and harness, and Beatrice watched him with interest. He certainly lived up to his belief in efficiency, because she did not think he omitted any precaution he could have

taken. There was something to admire in him as he quietly moved about beside the horses and the ponderous mass of iron. It would not be an easy matter to transport the load to the bottom of the gorge, but Beatrice felt that he was at his best when confronting a difficulty.

"The locked wheels won't hold her if anything goes wrong," he said. "Keep all the strain you can upon the rope."

They hooked it to the back axle, and Harding cautiously led the team down the incline while Devine went to the leading horses' heads, and the others checked the wagon with the tackle. The teams were obviously nervous, and the pole-horses now and then lifted their haunches to hold back the load, although they did not feel much of its weight. After some trouble Harding got the wagon round the first turning, taking the leaders up the side of the ravine in order to do so; but the trail ahead was steeper, and the big drop not far below. They chocked the wheels with logs while they moved the tackle, and Harding stood for a few moments, breathing heavily, as he looked down into the gorge. He could see the snowy trail wind for a short distance among the trees, and then it dipped out of sight beyond a turn. It was beaten hard, and here and there its surface caught a ray of light and flashed with an icy gleam. They were half-way down; but the worst was to come.

"It's an ugly bit," he cautioned Devine. "Hold the leaders in to the side of the hill."

They started, and as the weight came upon them the blocks screamed, and the men began to strain against the drag of the rope. Foot by foot they let it slip

round the smooth trunk of a tree, while the women stood watching the tall figure at the pole-horses' heads. The powerful animals braced themselves back, slipping a yard or two now and then, while Harding broke into a run. The cloud of steam that hung over them grew thicker as the trees closed in; the tackle was running out and those who held it were panting hard, but they had rope enough to reach the next bend.

Then there was a crash and Kenwyne, reeling backward with those behind him, fell heavily into the snow while the broken wire struck the trees. A shout from Devine came up the hollow, and Hester clenched her hand as she saw him flung off by a plunging horse and roll down the trail. He dropped over the edge, but the wagon, lurching violently, went on, and for a few moments Harding, running fast, clung to the near horse's head. Then he let go; but instead of jumping clear, as the watchers had expected, he grasped the side of the wagon as it passed and swung himself up. They saw him seize the reins, standing upright behind the driving-seat; and then the wagon plunged out of sight among the trees.

Devine, scrambling to his feet, ran madly after it and vanished; and the men who had held the tackle picked themselves up and looked down in dismay. There was nothing they could do. The disaster must happen before they could possibly reach the scene. It seemed impossible that Harding could get round the next turn.

Beatrice cast a quick glance at Hester, and felt braced by her attitude. They were not emotional at Allenwood; but the prairie girl bore herself with a stoic calm which Beatrice had never seen equaled there.

Her fiancé had narrowly escaped with his life, her brother was in imminent peril, yet her eyes were steady and her pose was firm. His danger could not be made light of, but the girl evidently had confidence in him. Beatrice imagined that Hester had her brother's swiftness of action, nevertheless she could wait and suffer calmly when there was nothing else to be done. After all, stern courage was part of the girl's birthright, for she was a daughter of the pioneers.

Beatrice did not know that her own face was tense and white. The accident had been unexpected and unnerving. She was shaken by its suddenness and by a dread she could not explain: it was no time for analysis of feelings. She was watching the trail with desperate concentration, wondering whether the wagon and its reckless driver would break out from the trees. In a moment they did appear — the team going downhill at a mad gallop, Harding lashing them with a loop of the reins. There is not often a brake on a prairie wagon, and as the chain that locked the wheels had obviously broken, Harding's intention was plain. He meant to keep the horses ahead of the iron load that would overturn the wagon and mangle the animals if it overtook them. This warranted his furious speed. But the trail was narrow and tortuous, and with the heavy weight spread over a long wheel-base, the wagon was hard to steer. Beatrice realized this, but in spite of her horror she felt a thrill of fierce approval.

The man was standing upright now; he looked strangely unmoved. Beatrice supposed this was a delusion; but she could see the nerve and judgment with which he guided the team. They were passing the spot where the bank fell away. The wheels on one side

were on its edge. Beatrice turned dizzy. She felt that they must go over, and man and horses and wagon be crushed to pulp beneath the heavy load. They passed; but there was a turn not far off, and room was needed to take the curve. As they rushed on, half hidden by the trees, she felt her breath come hard and a contraction in her throat as she wondered whether he could get round. If not, the load of iron would rush headlong over the fallen horses, leaving in its path a mass of mangled flesh and pools of blood. To her excited imagination, the boiler was no longer a senseless thing. It seemed filled with malevolent, destructive power; she felt she hated it.

There was a tense moment; then the leading horses plunged from the trees with the pole-team behind them, all still on their feet. Harding had somehow steered them round. But the danger was not yet over, for the trail shelved to one side and there was an awkward curve near the bridge. The wagon seemed to Beatrice to be going like the toboggans she had seen on the long slide at Montreal. It was more difficult to see as it got farther off and the trees were thicker. Her eyes filled with water from the intensity of her gaze, and she feared to waste a moment in wiping them. Something terrible might happen before she could see again. She wanted to shriek; and she might have done so only that, even in such a moment, she remembered what was expected of the Mowbray strain. Horses and wagon were still rushing on. Then there was a thud and a harsh rattle: Harding was on the bridge. Another moment and the mad beat of hoofs slackened and stopped.

Lance, waving his fur cap, broke into a harsh, tri-

umphant yell, and the rest of the Allenwood men set up a cheer. In the midst of it Devine appeared, scrambling up the hill through the brush.

"He's done it! He's done it!" he cried excitedly, running up to Hester. "It's great! She was going like an express freight on a downgrade when he jumped up."

Hester smiled at him proudly, and he turned and started off at top speed down the trail. They all followed, and, crossing the bridge, found Harding standing by his blowing team. The horses' coats were foul with sweat, and Harding's face was badly scratched, but he did not seem to know it, and except that he was breathless he looked much as usual.

"This is quite ridiculous!" Mrs. Broadwood panted, with a keen glance at Beatrice. "There's some excuse for Hester, but I can't see why you and I should go running after a man who doesn't belong to either of us and seems to feel a good deal cooler than we do!"

Beatrice flushed, but she did not answer.

"You were lucky in getting down," Kenwyne said to Harding. "We thought you were going over the bank."

"So did I, at first," Harding answered.

Broadwood and Lance made some remarks about the accident, and Hester watched them with a smile. There was a hint of strain in their voices, but their manner was very matter-of-fact. She surmised that they wished to forget their relapse into emotional excitement. She contented herself with giving her brother a quick, expressive look.

Harding unhooked the broken wire from the back of the wagon.

"Well," he said, "we must set about getting up."

The ascending trail had a gentler slope, and there was not much risk in climbing it; though it cost them heavy labor. With the help of a yoke of oxen, they got the wagon up, and when the top was reached Kenwyne came up to Harding.

"You and Devine have done enough," he said. "There should be no trouble now. We'll lead the teams home while you take it easy."

Harding was glad to comply. He followed with Hester and Mrs. Broadwood, because Beatrice seemed so evidently trying to avoid him.

The girl felt disturbed. When she thought that Harding could not escape, a curious sense of personal loss had intensified her alarm. Terror, of course, was natural; the other feeling was not to be explained so readily. Although she disliked some of his opinions, she knew that he attracted her. His was a magnetic nature: he exerted a strong influence over every one; but she would not admit that she was in love with him. That would be absurd. And yet she had been deeply stirred by his danger.

Lance and Devine had lingered in the rear, and the little group stopped in the middle of the trail and waited for them. Then, when they moved forward again, Beatrice and Harding were somehow thrown together, and she checked the impulse to overtake the others when she saw that she and the prairie man were falling behind. To avoid being alone with him would exaggerate his importance.

"You must have known you were doing a dangerous thing when you got up on the wagon," she said.

"I suppose I did," he replied. "But I saw that I

might lose the boiler if it went down the bank. The thing cost a good deal of money."

"You were able to remember that?"

"Certainly! Then there were the teams. It would have been a pity to let them be killed."

Beatrice thought he might have offered a better explanation. He had implied that anxiety about the boiler had influenced him more than regard for his horses. She felt that she must give him an opportunity for defending himself.

"I wonder which consideration counted most?"

He looked at her with amusement; and she flushed as she suddenly recalled that he was sometimes very shrewd.

"Well," he said, "the main thing was to get hold of the reins — and I don't know that it matters now."

"I suppose not," Beatrice agreed, vexed that he did not seem anxious to make the best impression. "After all, breaking land on a large scale must be expensive, and I understand that your plans are ambitious."

Harding glanced across the prairie: it ran back to the blue smear of trees on the horizon, covered with thin snow, and struck a note of utter desolation.

"Yes," he said with a gleam in his eyes. "All this looks lifeless and useless now, but I can see it belted with wheat and oats and flax in the fall. There will be a difference when the binders move through the grain in rows."

"In rows!"

"We'll want a number, if all goes well. Devine's land follows my boundary, and we must drive our plows in one straight line. We begin at the rise yonder and run east to the creek."

The boldness of the undertaking appealed to the girl as she glanced across the wide stretch of snow.

"It's a big thing," she said.

"A beginning. Two men can't do much, but more are coming. In a year or two the wheat will run as far as you can see, and there'll be homesteads all along the skyline."

They walked on in silence for a moment; then he gave her an amused glance.

"I guess Colonel Mowbray doesn't like what I'm doing?"

"He doesn't go so far. It's to what you are persuading our friends to do that he objects."

"That's a pity. They'll have to follow — not because I lead, but because necessity drives."

"You're taking it for granted that it does drive; and you must see my father's point of view."

"That I'm encouraging your people to rebel? That's not my wish, but he can't hold them much longer — the drift of things is against him."

Beatrice's eyes sparkled. He thought she looked very charming with her proud air and the color in her face; but he must keep his head. He was readjusting his opinions about sudden, mutual love, and he saw that precipitation might cost him too much. If he could not have the girl on his own terms, he must take her on hers.

"Colonel Mowbray founded the settlement," Beatrice said, "and it has prospered. Can't you understand his feelings when he sees his control threatened?"

"The time when one man could hold full command has gone. He can be a moral influence and keep the

right spirit in his people, but he must leave them freedom of action."

"That is just the trouble! It's the modern spirit which you are bringing into the settlement that disturbs us. We managed to get along very well before we ever heard of Mr. Harding and his steam-plow and his wheat-binders and his creameries."

She could not keep the slight scorn out of her voice; indeed, she did not wish to do so. But he took it good-naturedly.

"Do you know what I see?" he questioned with a smile. "A time when Colonel Mowbray — and Colonel Mowbray's daughter," he added teasingly —"will look with pride upon the vast acres of Allenwood turned from waste grassland into productive fields of wheat and oats and flax; when the obsolete horse-plow will be scrapped as old iron and the now despised steam-plow will be a highly treasured possession of every settler; when ——"

"Never!" Beatrice interrupted emphatically. "You must understand that my father's views and yours are as widely different as the poles — and my father is the head of Allenwood!"

Harding looked down at the haughty face turned up to him; and a great longing suddenly surged through him. He had never desired her more than at that instant. His admiration showed so strongly in his eyes that the blood swept into Beatrice's face.

"Bee!" Lance called back to them. "Mrs. Broadwood wants you to verify what I'm telling her about the collie pup."

Beatrice loved her brother for the interruption.

CHAPTER XII

THE ENEMY WITHIN

IT was getting late, but the Allenwood Sports Club prolonged its sitting at the Carlyon homestead. The institution had done useful work in promoting good fellowship by means of healthful amusements, but recently its management had fallen into the hands of the younger men, and the founders contented themselves with an occasional visit to see that all was going well. Some, however, were not quite satisfied, and Mowbray entertained suspicions about the Club. He was an autocrat, but he shrank from spying, or attempting to coerce a member into betraying his comrades. Some allowance must be made for young blood; and, after all, nothing that really needed his interference could go on, he felt, without his learning about it. Nevertheless, he had a disturbing feeling that an undesirable influence was at work.

Carlyon's room was unusually well furnished, and several fine London guns occupied a rack on the match-boarded wall. The cost of one would have purchased a dozen of the Massachusetts-made weapons which the prairie farmers used. The photograph of a horseman in English hunting dress with M.F.H. appended to the autograph was equally suggestive, and it was known that Carlyon's people had sent him to Canada with money enough to make a fair start. Unfortunately,

he had not realized that success in farming demands care and strenuous work.

He sat with a flushed, excited face at a rosewood table, upon which the cigar ends, bottles, and glasses scarcely left room for the cards he was eagerly scanning. Gerald Mowbray leaned back in his chair, watching him with a smile. Emslie, the third man, wore a disturbed frown; opposite him, Markham sat with a heavy, vacant air.

"Your luck's changing, Carlyon," Gerald said; "but we must stop at this round. Markham's half asleep — and I'm not surprised, considering what he's drunk; and the Colonel will wonder where I've been, if I stay much longer."

Carlyon drained his glass.

"Very well," he consented, with a harsh laugh and a glitter in his eyes. "As I've a good deal to get back, I'll double and throw my Percheron team in. Does that take you?"

Markham immediately became alert.

"I think not. Go on, Gerald!"

Gerald put down a card, Emslie followed with a deepening frown, but Markham chuckled as he played. Carlyon started, and then with an obvious effort pulled himself together. For the next few moments all were quiet, and the stillness was emphasized by the patter of the falling cards. Then Carlyon pushed his chair back noisily and looked at the others, his face pale and set.

"I thought it was a certainty; there was only one thing I forgot," he said in a strained voice.

Markham leaned forward heavily.

"Fellows who play like you can't afford to forget, my boy. Know better next time; let it be a lesson."

Carlyon glanced at a notebook and took out a wad of bills which he tried to count.

"Sorry, but I seem to be five dollars short; don't know when you'll get it, but I'll send the horses to the next Brandon sales. I dare say somebody will help me with my plowing."

"Don't be an ass!" said Gerald. "Throwing in the team was a piece of silly bluff. We're not going to take advantage of it."

Emslie nodded agreement; and Markham drawled: "Don't want his splay-footed beasts, and won't lend him my good Clydesdales to spoil. Count out the bills, Gerald; his hand is shaking."

Carlyon protested that he was a sportsman and paid his debts, but they overruled him.

"Silly thing to do, unless you're made," Markham declared. Then he turned to Gerald. "What's become of the younger brother? Never see him now."

"Oh, he's reformed. On the whole, it's just as well, for there's not room for two gamblers in the family. Besides, the Americans seem to have got hold of him: they live like Methodists."

"You mean the girl has? Devilish handsome; has a grand way of looking at you. Ask Carlyon; he knows."

Carlyon colored under Markham's broadly humorous gaze.

"Miss Harding won't trouble herself about Lance," he said. "I may add that she doesn't appreciate a graceful compliment."

"Smacked your face?" suggested Markham with a chuckle. "Must be going. Give me my coat."

A newspaper and some letters fell out of a pocket as he put it on, and he picked them up.

"Quite forgot. Met the mail-carrier as I was driving in. Better look what wheat is doing."

Carlyon eagerly opened the paper.

"Down again two cents at Chicago! Winnipeg will follow."

"There's a certain cure," said Markham thickly. "All stop plowing. If you do nothing long enough, 'must send the market up. Call it a brilliant idea; wonder nobody else thought of it. You look sober, Emslie. Come and help me into my rig."

They went out, and a few minutes afterward a furious beat of hoofs and a rattle of wheels rang out across the prairie.

"I hope he will get home without breaking his neck," Carlyon said to Gerald.

"Oh, Markham can take care of himself. But we have something else to think about now."

"That's true," Carlyon agreed with a depressed air. "I took your advice and told that fellow in the Pit to buy wheat; but I wish I'd heard Harding's speech at the council before I made the deal. Now it's clear that I'm dipped pretty deep." He picked up the letters that were scattered among the cards and started as he saw the embossed stamp on one of them. "It's from my broker; I'll soon know the worst."

Gerald, lighting a cigarette, watched the tense expression of the boy's face as he read the letter, and for a few moments nothing was said. Carlyon looked crushed, but Gerald's position was too serious to allow of his sympathizing much. Taking advantage of his

friends' love of excitement, he had won a number of small sums at cards, but this was of no account against what he owed. After a moment Carlyon laid a statement of account before him.

"You can see how much I'm out."

"Can't you carry it over?"

"Impossible," Carlyon answered dejectedly. "I didn't actually buy the grain; I've got to find the difference. Besides, what would be the use of holding on, if wheat's still going to drop?"

"It's awkward," Gerald agreed. "You might get some exemption under the Homesteads Act, but this broker could sell you up. Would your people do anything?"

"They won't be asked. Things were not going well with them when I left, and I guess they find it hard enough to keep Dick at college and provide for the girls. They gave me a good start, but it was understood that I'd get nothing more."

"Then the only remedy is to borrow the money here."

Carlyon laughed.

"Who'd lend it to me? Besides, if the Colonel knew how I was fixed, he'd turn me out of the settlement."

"I know a man in Winnipeg who does this kind of business, but he'd charge you high and want a bond. That means he'd seize your land in a year or two if you couldn't pay."

"The other fellow would seize it now," Carlyon said with eagerness. "If I could get the money, I'd have time to see what could be done, and something might turn up. Will you introduce me?"

The matter was arranged before Gerald left; and two days later they were in Winnipeg. They found Davies willing to do business. Indeed, after making a few difficulties as an excuse for raising the interest, he supplied Carlyon with the money he needed, and when the men left his office he lighted a cigar with a satisfied smile. He now held two mortgages on land at Allenwood, and he thought that he could make good use of them if, as he expected, the loans were not repaid. Then it was possible that Mowbray might bring him another customer. He saw a big profit for himself, and trouble for the Allenwood settlers, when the reckoning came.

Shortly after Gerald's visit to Winnipeg, one of his neighbors returned from England, where he had gone to look into matters connected with some property he had recently inherited. His absence had been a relief to Beatrice, and she was especially disturbed to learn that on his arrival he had spent an hour in private talk with her father. Brand had continually shown strong admiration for her, which she by no means reciprocated. She did not actually dislike the man; but his attentions annoyed her. She knew, however, that he enjoyed Colonel Mowbray's full approval. He came of good family and his character was irreproachable; moreover, being past forty, he had outgrown all youthful rashnesses. Of rather handsome person and polished manners, Brand was generally characterized by staid gravity, and Mowbray considered his views exceptionally sound.

Beatrice was keenly curious about what he had said to her father. She imagined that her mother knew, but no hint was given to her, and when she met Brand

it was always in the company of others and there was nothing to be gathered from his manner. It was, however, not often that he displayed his sentiments.

The thaw had begun when she walked home from the Broadwood farm one afternoon. The snow had vanished as if by magic, and shallow lagoons glittered among the bleached grass. The sky was a brilliant blue, and rounded clouds with silver edges rolled across it before the fresh northwest breeze which would blow persistently until summer was done. Their swift shadows streaked the plain and passed, leaving it suffused with light. There was a genial softness in the air.

Beatrice picked her way cautiously toward a straggling bluff, for the ponds along its edge had overflowed and the ground was marish. On reaching the woods she stopped in a sheltered nook to enjoy the sunshine. The birches and poplars were bare, but their stems were changing color and the twigs had lost their dry and brittle look. The willows in a hollow were stained with vivid hues by the rising sap, and there was a flush of green among the grass. Small purple flowers like crocuses were pushing through the sod. From high overhead there fell a harsh, clanging cry, and the girl, looking up, saw a flock of brent geese picked out in a wedge against the sky. Behind came a wedge of mallard, and farther off, gleaming snowily, a flight of sandhill cranes. Spring was in the air; the birds had heard its call, and were pressing on toward the polar marshes, following the sun. Beatrice felt a curious stirring of her blood. It was half pleasant, half painful, for while she responded to the gladness that per-

vaded everything the sunshine kissed, she was conscious of a disturbing longing, a mysterious discontent. She would not try to analyze her feelings, but she felt that her life was narrow and somehow incomplete.

She was startled presently by a drumming of hoofs; and she frowned as Brand rode out of the bluff. He had seen her, and she decided not to try to avoid him by walking on. If she must face a crisis, it was better to get it over. Brand got down and turned to her with a smile. He looked well in his wide, gray hat and his riding dress, for the picturesqueness of the fringed deerskin jacket, which was then the vogue at Allenwood, did not detract from his air of dignity. His features were regular, but his expression was somewhat cold.

"I'm glad we have met, and I'll confess that I expected to find you here. In fact, I came to look for you," he said with a smile.

Beatrice knew what was coming. While she felt that it would be better to meet the situation frankly, she nevertheless shrank from doing so.

"I have seen so little of you since you came home," she said, partly to defer his declaration, "that I haven't had an opportunity for expressing my sympathy."

"It was a shock," he answered. "I hadn't seen either of my cousins since they were boys, but we were good friends then, and I never expected to succeed them. Their yacht was run down at night, and when the steamer got her boat out only the paid hand was left."

"Will you go back to England now to live?"

"I think I'll stay at Allenwood. One gets used to

Western ways — although there's a good deal to be said for either course, and it doesn't altogether depend on me."

Beatrice hesitated a moment, then:

"There is some one else to please?" she asked with charming innocence.

Brand drew a quick breath as he gazed at the young face so near him. She was leaning against a poplar trunk, the sun fretting her with gold between the bare branches, the wind caressing a few loose strands of hair that were blown across her cheek.

"I will please the girl I hope to marry," he said in a strained voice. "She loves the prairie, and she shall have her choice. I think you know, Beatrice, that I have long been waiting for you."

Beatrice was annoyed to find herself blushing.

"I'm sorry," she faltered. "You know I tried to show you — you must see it was difficult."

"It is not your fault that I wouldn't take a hint," he answered quietly. "But you are very young; and I knew that I would never change."

"You thought I might?"

"I hoped so. I was afraid that after the romantic admiration you have had from the boys, you might find me too matter-of-fact and staid. But there was a chance that you might get used to that, and I made up my mind to be patient."

"I'm sorry, for your sake, that you waited."

Her glance was gently regretful, and he read decision in it, but he was a determined man.

"It seems I haven't waited long enough," he returned with a faint smile. "But while you will grow more attractive for a long time yet, I have reached my

prime, and inheriting the English property rather forced my hand. After all, our life here is bare and monotonous — you would have a wider circle and more scope in the Old Country."

Beatrice liked his terseness and in some ways she liked and respected him. Moreover she was offered a beautiful English country house, a position of some influence, and friends of taste and rank.

"You were very considerate," she said. "But I'm afraid what you wish is impossible."

"Wait!" he begged. "I haven't said much about myself, but I believe I appreciate you better than any of the boys is capable of doing; I could carry your wishes further and take more care of you." He paused with a grave smile. "I'm not a romantic person, but I think I'm trustworthy. Then, it would please your father."

"Ah! You have told him?"

"Yes; and he was good enough to express his full approval."

Beatrice's face was disturbed, but she answered frankly:

"Though I know you won't take an unfair advantage of his consent, I wish you hadn't gone to him. It may make things more difficult for me. And now, please understand that I cannot marry you."

Brand's lips came together in a straight line. He did not have a pleasant look; but his voice was unusually suave when he answered:

"It looks as if I must face my disappointment. I'll do nothing that might embarrass you. All the same, I warn you that I shall not despair."

"You must not think of me," Beatrice said firmly.

"I'm very sorry, but I want to save you trouble."

He quietly picked up his horse's bridle.

"You are going home? May I walk with you as far as the trail-forks?"

Beatrice could not refuse this, and he talked pleasantly about Allenwood matters until he left her. She went on alone in a thoughtful mood. She wished that Brand had not made his offer, because she knew that her refusal had been a blow, and she did not like to think that she had wounded him. Moreover, his quiet persistence might still prove troublesome. Perhaps it was unfortunate that she could not return his affection; for Brand had many good qualities, and her father approved of him. Then, with a thrill of perplexing emotion, she thought of Harding. In some respects, he was too practical and matter-of-fact; but she knew that his character had another side. While he worked and planned, he had dreams of a splendid future which she thought would be realized. He was a visionary as well as a man of affairs; virile, daring, and beneath the surface generous and tender. It was curious how she knew so much about him, yet she felt that she was right.

Harding was, however, barred out, so to speak; divided from her by conventions and traditions that could not be broken, unless, indeed, love warranted the sacrifice. But she would not admit that she loved him. He loved her, she knew; but that was not enough. It was all complicated; nothing seemed right. She no longer noticed the sunshine or the bracing freshness of the wind as she moved on across the plain with downcast eyes.

Nerving herself for the encounter, she told her

father that evening, and he sat silent for a few moments, looking hard at her while she stood by his writing table with an embarrassed air.

"It seems to me you are very hard to please," he said.

"Perhaps I am," she answered. "But I don't like him enough."

"I suppose that's an adequate reason, but I regret it keenly. It would have been a relief to know your future was secure, as it would have been with Brand."

Beatrice was touched. He had not taken the line she expected, and she saw that he was anxious.

"Perhaps it's better that you should learn the truth," he went on. "For the last few years my affairs have not gone well. Gerald's extravagance has been a heavy drain; Lance is young and rash; and I feel now that the prosperity of Allenwood is threatened. The American made me realize that. In fact, the fellow has brought us trouble ever since he came."

"Perhaps it might be wise to take a few of the precautions he recommended," Beatrice suggested, eager to lead him away from the subject of Brand.

Mowbray's eyes flashed with anger.

"No! If we are to be ruined, I hope we'll meet our fate like gentlemen — and it may not come to that. We have struggled through critical periods before, and can make a good fight yet without using detestable means."

Beatrice was troubled. She admired her father's pride and courage, but she had an uncomfortable suspicion that he was leading a forlorn hope. Unflinching bravery was not the only thing needful: one could not face long odds with obsolete weapons.

"But they are not all detestable," she urged. "You could choose the best — or, if you like, the least offensive."

"Compromise is dangerously easy; when you begin, you are apt to go all the way. I didn't expect this from you. I believed my own family staunch, and I must say it's a shock to find the tradesman's spirit in my children. Even Lance shows the taint. He actually is planning to sell his riding horses and buy some machine that will save a hired man's wages!"

Beatrice smiled.

"Perhaps that is better than following Gerald's example. But you mustn't be unjust. You know that none of us would think of thwarting you."

She crossed over to the back of his chair and put her arms around him.

"I'm sorry you are disappointed about Mr. Brand," she said softly; "but I know you'll forgive me."

Before he could answer, she had slipped out of the room. She went at once to find her mother.

"Your father would never force you to marry a man you do not care for," Mrs. Mowbray assured her. "So far as that goes, you have nothing to fear."

"What do you mean?" Beatrice asked in alarm.

Her mother's eyes were anxious, and there was a warning in the look she gave the girl.

"My dear, you would not find him compliant if you wished to marry a man he did not approve of."

Beatrice stooped to flick an imaginary piece of lint off of her skirt. She did not want her mother to see her face just then.

"After all," she answered, far more confidently than she felt, "that may never happen."

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAITOR

THE prairie was bright with sunshine, and the boisterous west wind was cut off by a bluff where Harding sat amid a litter of dismantled machinery. Behind him the newly opened birch leaves showed specks of glowing green, and a jack-rabbit, which had put off its winter coat and was now dappled white and gray, fed quietly, with a watchful eye turned toward the unconscious man; in front, the vast sweep of grass that flashed with a silvery gleam as it bowed to the wind was broken by the warm chocolate hue of a broad strip of plowing. The rows of clods, with their polished faces, stretched across the foreground; and on their outer edge Devine, dressed in overalls the color of the soil, drove a team of big, red oxen.

Harding, however, was absorbed in the study of several brass rings and coils of packing that had formed the gland of a pump. Near by stood a giant plow with a row of shares, looking out of place among the earth and grass with its glaring paint, its ugly boiler, and its sooty stack, though the work that it had done was obvious. Something had gone wrong, and Harding was trying to locate the trouble. The delay was embarrassing, for he had a wide stretch of land to break, and the loss of even an hour was serious. There was not a trained mechanic in the neighborhood; and if

the plow were likely to give him trouble, the sooner he learned to master it the better. Every part of the machine seemed to be perfect; yet the steam had gone down on the previous evening, and he must find out the reason. It was exasperating work.

While Harding was struggling with the pump, Beatrice came along the trail through the bluff. Her companion, Banff, one of Lance's many dogs, had trailed off through the bushes, his nose to the ground, and she was, for the moment, alone. When she caught sight of Harding she stopped irresolutely. She felt that it might be wiser to pass on without disturbing him; yet something compelled her to wait.

She stood watching him. He attracted her — that much she admitted; but she persuaded herself that it was only because he was interesting to talk to and, unlike the other men she knew, he said things that made one think.

Harding was so deep in his machinery problem that he did not see her. He was once more fitting the different parts together, when Banff came bounding out of the bushes with a glad bark and the little gray rabbit scuttled off through the briars.

Harding turned quickly; and Beatrice saw his eyes light up.

"I'm glad you've come," he said, emptying a box of tools and turning it upside down. "That isn't a bad seat — and the sun's pleasant here."

Beatrice noticed that he took it for granted that she would remain; but, after all, he had some reason for this, for they seldom passed without stopping to speak when they met.

"Has the machine gone wrong?" she asked, sitting down where the sunlight fell upon her.

"Yes, pretty badly. I can't find out what's the matter. I suppose you think it's a just punishment for bringing such things to Allenwood?"

She laughed.

"Well, you gave our friends some offense when you brought your plow over and broke Kenwyne's land."

"I expected that. There'll no doubt be more remarks when I break the piece of stiff gumbo on Lance's holding."

Beatrice looked up sharply.

"You mean to do that? You must know it will cause trouble," she said with a frown.

"I'm sorry to displease you; but this is something that must be done."

"Why must it? Do you wish Lance to offend his father?"

"No; but Colonel Mowbray has no cause for complaint. He gave the land to Lance on the understanding that he worked it; there's no reason why he should object to his using the best implements. Then, Lance is your brother and I don't want to see him ruined."

Beatrice blushed under his frank gaze; and because she was annoyed at doing so, she flung out a taunt:

"Do you think the only way of escaping ruin is to copy you?"

Harding laughed. He loved her in that mood. She looked so alluring with a little frown between her brows and just the suspicion of a pout on her lips.

"You see," he explained, in a voice that he might have used to an offended child, "your Allenwood

friends will have to make a change soon, or they'll suffer. And their attitude is not logical. Your father doesn't ask them to cultivate with the spade; they've dropped the ox-teams and bought Clydesdales; they've given up the single furrow and use the gang-plow. Why not go on to steam? After all, you're not standing still: you're moving forward a little behind the times. Why not keep abreast of them, or push on ahead?"

"It sounds plausible," she admitted. "In a way, perhaps, you're right; but——"

"I know. There's much that's fine and graceful in the customs of the past. But you can't preserve them without some adaptation. We're a new nation working in the melting pot. All the scum and dross comes to the top and makes an ugly mess, but the frothing up clarifies the rest. By and by the product will be run out, hard, true metal."

"You're an optimist."

Harding laughed.

"I'm talking at random; it's a weakness of mine."

Beatrice sat silent a moment, looking out over the stretch of brown furrows.

"Do you intend to continue the breaking to where your partner is at work?" she asked, putting her thoughts into words.

"I'm going farther back. You can see our guide-poles on the top of the last ridge."

"But isn't it rash to sow so much, unless you have a reserve to carry you over a bad harvest? Suppose the summer's dry or we get autumn frost?"

"Then," said Harding grimly, "there'll be a disastrous smash. I've no reserve: I'm plowing under every

cent I have — staking all upon the chances of the weather."

"But why do you take such a risk? Doesn't it daunt you?"

He saw a gleam of sympathetic approval in her eyes. She had courage: it was in the blood of those who stood for lost causes. Suddenly swept off his feet, he determined to follow the lead she unconsciously had given him.

"Well," he said, leaning forward on the big plow, "I'll tell you."

He paused with a smile, for he saw that the position he accidentally had taken was unfortunate. He had associated himself with the machine which, in a sense, materialized the difference between her people and him. He did not change his position; instead, one hand moved caressingly over the clumsy plow while he spoke.

"One gets easily nothing that's worth having; it must be worked and schemed and fought for. I took the risk for you!"

Beatrice started and an indignant flush suffused her face. She was alarmed and angry, and yet the shock she felt was not surprise. He had once given her a plain warning, and she had continued to see him. Her traditions took arms against him, old prejudices revived, and her pride was wounded, but something in her turned traitor, and she felt a strange responsive thrill.

"You do not know what you are saying," she said haughtily, rising from the tool-box and turning toward a spot of bare ground where the dog was digging energetically. "Here, Banff!" Then, obeying some im-

pulse which she did not understand, she added to Harding: "You scarcely know anything about me!"

"When I met you that night at the river and saw your face in the moonlight, I knew all that was needful."

The answer moved the girl. She wondered whether one could fall in love that way. But she must end the interview and escape from an embarrassing position.

"I am sorry our acquaintance has led to this; I would have prevented it if I could," she said. "And now, good-afternoon!"

Harding straightened up, and one hand clenched.

"Stop! We're going to thrash this matter out."

His manner was commanding and Beatrice waited, although she was not used to obeying.

"You were angry at first," he said. "You are rather angry now; but I did you no wrong."

"I admit that. But I wish this hadn't happened. It has spoiled everything."

"Then you liked me as a friend?"

"Yes," Beatrice answered hesitatingly; "I'll be frank. You are different from the men I know."

"Then what have you against me as a lover? Character, person, manners, or opinions?"

She was silent a moment, feeling that she ought to go away. In staying she was trifling with danger; but after all he had a right to be heard.

"Oh, I know your people's point of view," he went on; "but I think it is not altogether yours. In one respect, they're wrong. My mother was the daughter of a bush pioneer, and in all that's most important I'm her son; but my father belonged to your own rank. He

was brought up as an English gentleman. I'll show you the evidence I have of this some day, though it makes no difference."

"It must make a difference," Beatrice insisted with a surprised look.

"It can make none. For some reason his relatives cast him off, and declined to claim me. I don't know why, and I shall never trouble to find out. I tell you this because I think you ought to know. It is as Craig Harding, the prairie farmer, that I stand or fall; my own faults and merits are the only things that count."

"It's a bold claim you make."

"Well," he said, "so far, I've been clearing the ground. The sure foundation is the bed-rock of human nature, and we must settle this as man and woman. I know what you are; I knew when I first saw you; and I want you. I need you, Beatrice. My love is great enough to master any doubt you may have, and to hold you safe from all harm. Then, if all goes well, I can give you what you wish, and put you where you want to be. The woman I marry will have a wider influence than the wife of any man at Allenwood; a small matter in the real scale of things, but with so much against me I must urge all I can." He paused and stretched out his hands. "You are not afraid, Beatrice. It is not too great a venture for you?"

She stood still, with a tense expression, struggling against something that drew her toward him. Prudence, training, and prejudice, urged her to resist, and yet she was on the point of yielding.

"I *am* afraid," she said. "Only one thing could justify such a risk."

"That's true; it's what encourages me. You couldn't have made me love you as I do, unless you were able to give love in return."

She was silent, knowing that what he said was true.

He took a step nearer her, and his own face was tense.

"If you can declare you care nothing at all for me, that it would cause you no regret if you never saw me again, I'll make the best fight I can with my trouble and leave you alone for good. You will answer honestly?"

The color swept into her face, for she felt compelled to speak the naked truth.

"I can't go so far as that," she said in a low voice. "I should feel regret."

"Then the rest will follow! Why do you hesitate?"

She smiled, for the matter was too serious for trivial embarrassment, and she knew the man would force her to deal frankly with plain issues.

"You seem so sure?"

"I am, of myself."

"The difficulty is that I'm not an isolated individual, but a member of a family, and belong to a race that has its code of rules. I must think of the shock to my parents and my friends; all the pain that any rash act of mine might give to others. They may be wrong, but what they think I feel, in a half-instinctive way, that reasoning can't change. I should have to stand upon defense against my subconscious self."

"I know," he said gently. "But the choice is one that many have to make. One must often stand alone.

It's true that I have all to gain and you all to risk; but, Beatrice ——"

He broke off, and held out both hands appealingly to her.

"Beatrice!"

The girl was deeply stirred. She had not expected him to plead like this. In her world one took things for granted and implied instead of asserting them. At Allenwood he was spoken of as a rude, materialistic iconoclast, but she had found him a reckless idealist; although he made her feel that instead of being impractical he was dealing with stern realities. She would have made the great adventure only that she was not sure of her own heart yet. The consequences were too serious for one to risk a mistake.

She stood motionless, her eyes veiled by her dark lashes, and he knew the struggle that was going on within her. In his own eyes there was a great yearning; but a birthright of the pioneer is patience.

"I'm afraid you ask too much," she said at last. "If you like, you may think I am not brave enough." She raised her eyes to his; and winced at the pain she saw there. But she went on bravely: "Had things been different, I might perhaps have married you, but I think our ways are separate. And now you must let me go, and not speak of this again."

He bowed, and it struck Beatrice that there was a great dignity in his bearing.

"Very well," he answered gravely. "I will not trouble you again unless, in one way or another, you give me permission."

She turned away, and he stood still until long after

she and the dog had disappeared in the bluff. Then he roused himself with a laugh.

"I won't get her this way!" he said half aloud, and picked up some of the fittings of the pump.

Beatrice went straight to her mother, for there was strong confidence between the two.

"So you refused him!" Mrs. Mowbray said, after listening silently while Beatrice was telling her of the interview. "Did you find it hard?"

"Yes," she answered slowly; "harder than I thought. But it was the only way."

"If you felt that, dear, it certainly was so."

Beatrice looked up in surprise, but her mother's face was quietly thoughtful.

"You can't mean that I did not do right?"

"No; there's a heavy penalty for leaving the circle you were born in and breaking caste. It would have hurt me to see you suffer as you must have done. Only the very brave can take that risk."

The girl was puzzled. Her mother agreed with her, and yet she had faintly reflected Harding's ideas.

"Well," Beatrice said, "I shrink from telling Father."

"I'm not sure that he need know. It would disturb him, and he might do something that we should regret. On the whole, I think you had better visit our friends in Toronto as you were asked. They would be glad to have you for the summer."

"Do you wish me to run away?" Beatrice asked in surprise.

"It might be better for both. Harding is not one of us, but I think he feels things deeply, and his is a

stubborn nature. In a sense, it is your duty to make it as easy as you can for him."

Beatrice looked at her mother curiously.

"You seem more concerned about Mr. Harding than I expected."

"He gave your brother his coat in the blizzard and saved his life," Mrs. Mowbray answered. "That counts for something."

The girl hesitated a moment.

"Well, I'll go to Toronto," she promised.

CHAPTER XIV

A BOLD SCHEME

ONE morning a week or two after his meeting with Beatrice, Harding drove his rattling engine across the plowed land. His face was sooty, his overalls were stained with grease, and now and then a shower of cinders fell about his head. Behind him Devine stood in the midst of a dust-cloud, regulating the bite of the harrows that tossed about the hard, dry clods. It was good weather for preparing the seed-bed, and the men had been busy since sunrise, making the most of it. Spring comes suddenly in the Northwest, the summer is hot but short, and the grain must be sown early if it is to escape the autumn frost.

When they reached the edge of the breaking, Harding stopped the engine, and, taking a spanner from a box, turned to look about. The blue sky was flecked with fleecy clouds driving fast before the western breeze. The grass had turned a vivid green, and was checkered by clusters of crimson lilies. The ducks and geese had gone, but small birds of glossy black plumage with yellow bars on their wings fluttered round the harrows.

"Looks promising," Harding said. "The season has begun well. That's fortunate, for we have lots to do. I'd go on all night if there was a moon."

"Then I'm glad there isn't," Devine replied; "I want some sleep. But this jolting's surely rough on the machine. I wasn't sure that new locomotive type would work. She's too heavy to bang across the furrows with her boiler on board."

"She'll last until I get my money back, which is all I want. The rope-haulage pattern has its drawbacks, but the machine we're using won't be on the market long. They'll do away with furnace and boiler, and drive by gasoline or oil. I'd thought of trying that, but they haven't got the engine quite right yet."

"You look ahead," Devine commented.

"I have to; I must make this farm pay. Now if you'll clear the harrows, I'll tighten these brasses up."

He set to work, but while he adjusted the loose bearing Devine announced in a whisper:

"Here's the Colonel!"

Harding saw Mowbray riding toward them, and went on with his task. Beatrice had no doubt told her mother about his proposal, and he could imagine the Colonel's anger if he had heard of it. Pulling up his horse near the harrows, Mowbray sat silent, watching Harding. Fastidiously neat in dress, with long riding gloves and a spotless gray hat, he formed a marked contrast to the big, greasy man sprinkled with soot from the engine.

"I regret, Mr. Harding, that after the service you did my son, I should come with a complaint when I visit you."

"We'll let the service go; I'll answer the complaint as far as I can."

"Very well. I was disagreeably surprised to learn that you have persuaded my friends to take a course

which the majority of our council decided against, and to which it is well known that I object."

Harding felt relieved. Mowbray did not seem to know of what he had said to Beatrice, and his grievance did not require very delicate handling. Harding was too proud to conciliate him, and as he could expect nothing but uncompromising opposition, he saw no necessity for forbearance.

"The majority was one, a casting vote," he said. "If you are referring to my plowing for some of your people, I did not persuade them. They saw the advantage of mechanical traction and asked me to bring the engine over."

"The explanation doesn't take us far. It's obvious that they couldn't have experimented without your help."

"I hardly think that's so. There are dealers in Winnipeg and Toronto who would be glad to sell them the machines. If three or four combined, they could keep an engine busy and the cost wouldn't be prohibitive."

"Our people are not mechanics," Mowbray said haughtily.

"I'm not sure that's a matter for congratulation," Harding answered with a smile. "But I never drove a steam-plow until a few weeks ago, and there seems to be no reason why your friends shouldn't learn. You don't claim that they're less intelligent than I am."

"Your talents run in this direction," Mowbray retorted with a polished sneer.

"In a way, that's fortunate. When you're farming for a profit, you want to be able to do a little of everything. Some of the Allenwood boys are pretty good

horse-breakers, and you approve; why managing an engine should be objectionable isn't very plain."

"It is not my intention to argue these matters with you."

"Then what is it you want me to do?"

"To be content with using these machines on your own land. I must ask you to leave Allenwood alone."

"I'm afraid you ask too much," Harding replied. "I can't break off the arrangements now without a loss to your friends and myself, and I see no reason why I should do so."

"Do you consider it gentlemanly conduct to prompt men who acknowledge me as their leader to thwart my wishes?"

"Hardly so. Where you have a clear right to forbid anything that might be hurtful to the settlement, I'd be sorry to interfere."

Mowbray's eyes glinted.

"Do you presume to judge between my people and me?"

"Oh, no," Harding answered with good humor. "That's not my business; but I reserve the right to do what's likely to pay me, and to make friends with whom I please, whether they belong to Allenwood or not."

Mowbray was silent a moment, looking down at him with a frown.

"Then there's nothing more to be said. Your only standard seems to be what is profitable."

Mowbray rode away, and Devine laughed.

"Guess the Colonel isn't used to back talk, Craig. If he wasn't quite so high-toned, he'd go home and throw things about. What he wants is somebody to stand right up to him. You'll have him plumb up

against you right along; where you look at a thing one way, he looks at it another. It's clean impossible that you should agree."

"I'm afraid that's so," said Harding. "And now we'll make a start again."

The ribbed wheels bit the clods, and the engine lurched clumsily across the furrows, with the harrows clattering as they tore through the tangled grass roots and scattered the dry soil. Harding was violently shaken, and Devine half smothered by the dust that followed them across the breaking. It was not a dainty task, and the machine was far from picturesque, but they were doing better work than the finest horses at Allenwood were capable of. The sun grew steadily hotter, the lower half of Harding's body was scorched by the furnace, and the perspiration dripped from his forehead upon his greasy overalls, but he held on until noon, with the steam gradually going down. The boiler was of the water-tube type and the water about Allenwood was alkaline.

"She must hold up until supper, and I'll try to wash her out afterward," he said.

"You were at it half last night," Devine objected.

"That's the penalty for using new tools. They have their tricks, and you've got to learn them. I don't find you get much without taking trouble."

"I believe you're fond of trouble," Devine answered, laughing.

They went home together, for Devine often dined with the Hardings. They had just finished the meal of salt pork and fried potatoes when there was a rattle of wheels. Hester was putting the dessert — hot

cakes soaked in molasses — and coffee on the table, but she went to the door.

"A stranger in a buggy!" she announced.

Harding was surprised to see the Winnipeg land-agent getting down, but he greeted him hospitably.

"Come in and have some dinner," he invited.

Davies entered and bowed to Hester.

"No, thanks. As I didn't know where I'd be at noon, I brought some lunch along. But if it won't trouble Miss Harding, I'll take some coffee."

He sat down and the men lighted their pipes; and Hester studied the newcomer as she removed the plates. He was smartly dressed and had an alert look, but while there was nothing particular in his appearance that she could object to, she was not prepossessed in his favor. Davies had already noticed that the room was of a type common to the prairie homesteads. Its uncovered floor was, perhaps, cleaner than usual when plowing was going on, and the square stove was brightly polished, but the room contained no furniture that was not strictly needed. There was nothing that suggested luxury; and comfort did not seem to be much studied. On the other hand, he had noticed outside signs of bold enterprise and a prosperity he had not expected to find. Davies was a judge of such matters, and he saw that his host was a man of practical ability.

"What brought you into our neighborhood?" Harding asked.

Davies smiled.

"I'm always looking for business, and I find it pays to keep an eye on my customers. Some of them have a trick of lighting out when things go wrong, and leav-

ing a few rusty implements to settle their debts. Financing small farmers isn't always profitable."

"They can't take their land away," Devine said. "I guess you don't often lose much in the end."

"Land!" exclaimed Davies. "I've money locked up in holdings I can't sell, and have to pay big taxes on."

"You'll sell them all right by and by, but of course you know that," Harding replied. He gave the land-agent a shrewd look. "You have a call or two to make at Allenwood, and would rather get there in the afternoon?"

"True! The boys might find it embarrassing if I showed up just now. They're willing to do business with me, and when they're in Winnipeg they'll take a cigar or play a game of pool; but asking me to lunch is a different matter." He continued smiling, but Hester, who was watching him closely, thought there was something sinister in his amusement as he added: "They stick to the notions they brought from the Old Country, and I don't know that they'll find them pay."

"I shouldn't imagine all the business you'd get at Allenwood would have made a trip from Winnipeg worth while," Harding said.

"That's so," Davies agreed, as if eager to explain. "I'd a call in Brandon, and wanted to look up some customers in the outlying settlements. When I got so far, I thought I'd come on and see how this country's opening up. I notice the boys are doing pretty well."

"You don't mean at Allenwood? You haven't been there yet."

"No; this is my first trip, and I expect it will be my last. Is there much doing yonder?"

"The land's all right. They hauled out some fine wheat last fall. Stock's better than the usual run, and they've the finest light horses I've seen."

"That's more in their line than farming," Davies replied. "You wouldn't call raising horses a business proposition just now?"

Hester thought the men were fencing, trying to learn something about each other's real opinions. Craig looked careless, but Hester was not deceived. She knew him well, and saw that he was thinking.

"Prices are certainly low; but it strikes me you had better keep out of Colonel Mowbray's way," Harding said. "If he suspected that any of the boys had dealings with you, he'd make trouble, and probably insist upon paying you off."

Davies looked hard at him. He was not prepared to admit that he had lent money at Allenwood, but he could not tell how much Harding knew.

"One seldom objects to being paid a debt. Has the Colonel much money to spare?"

"I don't know; I can't claim to be a friend of his."

"Well, it doesn't matter, as I've nothing to do with him. Now that I'm here, I'll say that I'd be glad to accommodate you and your partner if you want to extend your operations or hold on for better prices at any time. You're putting in a big crop."

"Thanks; I don't think we'll make a deal," Devine drawled. "We don't farm for the benefit of another man. When I haul my wheat to the elevators I want the money myself, and not to turn it over to somebody else, who'll leave me a few pennies to go on with."

Davies took his leave soon afterward, and Devine and Harding went back to the plow. They had some

trouble in keeping steam, and after a little the heavy engine sank into the soft soil as they crossed a hollow where the melting snow had run. The ribbed wheels went in deeper as they crushed down the boggy mold, and ground up the fence posts the men thrust under them. Before long they were embedded to the axle, and Harding turned off the steam.

"Bring the wagon and drop me off a spade as you pass," he said. "I'll dig her out while you drive to the bluff and cut the biggest poplar logs you can find."

When Devine hurried away he sat down and lighted his pipe. Until he got the spade there was nothing to be done and much to think about. To begin with, Davies' visit had turned his attention upon a matter that had already occupied his thoughts, and proved it worth consideration. The Allenwood homesteads were the best in the country, the settlement was fortunately located, and its inhabitants were people of intelligence. Their progress had been retarded by customs and opinions out of place on the prairie, but they might go a long way if these were abandoned. They were farming on the wrong lines, and wasting effort, but Harding did not think this would continue. Already some among them were pressing for a change. Harding was ready to work his big farm alone, but he looked to Allenwood for help that would benefit all.

The matter, however, had a more important side. Although Beatrice had refused him he did not despair; she had shown that she did not regard him with complete indifference. It was not his personal character, but his position and her father's hostility that stood in the way, and these were obstacles that might be overcome. He could expect nothing but the Colonel's stern

opposition, and he must carefully arm himself for the fight; he did not undervalue the power of his antagonist.

Devine returned and threw him down a spade, and for the next hour Harding worked steadily, digging a trench to the buried wheels and beating its bottom flat. When his comrade came back they lined it with the logs he brought, and Harding started the engine. The machine shook and rattled, straining and panting under a full head of steam, but the wheels churned furiously in the soil and smashed the ends of the logs they bit upon. One big piece shot out of the trench and narrowly missed Devine, who fell among the harrows when he jumped. Harding stopped the engine as his friend got up.

"This won't do," he said. "We'll cut a log into short billets."

They packed some, split into sections, under the wheels, and Harding restarted the engine.

"Now," he said, "you can shove the rest in as she grinds them down."

The wheels spun, splintering the timber, rising a few inches and sinking again, while the big machine shook and tilted in danger of falling over. Harding, standing on the slippery plates, opened the throttle wide, and after a while the front rose to a threatening height while the logs groaned and cracked.

"Stand clear!" he cried. "She's climbing out!"

The engine straightened itself with a dangerous lurch, rolled forward, gathering speed, and ran out on to firmer ground. They had no further trouble, and when dusk settled down and the air grew sharp, Harding drew the fire and blew the water out of the boiler.

"After all, we have done pretty good work to-day," he said. "I'll come back and tend to those tubes as soon as she cools."

They went home together, and after supper was finished, they sat smoking and talking in the kitchen. It was now sharply cold outside, but the small room was warm and cheerful with the nickeled lamp lighted and a fire in the polished stove.

"The mortgage man was trying to play you," Devine remarked. "He certainly didn't learn much. Do you reckon he has been lending money to the Allenwood boys?"

"I think it's very likely."

"Then, with their way of farming and wheat going down, they won't be able to pay him off."

"No; and he doesn't want them to pay him off," Harding answered.

"You mean he wants their farms?"

"Yes; he'll probably get them, unless somebody interferes."

"Ah!" exclaimed Devine. "Who's going to interfere? . . . Now *you* have been thinking of something all afternoon."

Harding smiled.

"It's possible I may see what I can do," he admitted.

"You're a daisy!" Devine exclaimed. "It wouldn't surprise me if you thought of buying up the Canadian Pacific. All the same, I don't see where you're going to get the money. What do you think, Hester?"

Hester laid down her sewing.

"Isn't it too big a thing, Craig? You have a great

deal of land now, and even if you get a good harvest, you'd hardly have money enough to sow another crop and leave enough to carry you over a bad season."

Harding quietly lighted his pipe, and there was silence for a few minutes. His sister and her fiancé knew him well and had confidence in his ability; he had so far made good, but the boldness of this last scheme daunted them.

"Farming has two sides," he said presently. "You want to raise the best and biggest crop you can; and then you want to handle your money well. That's where many good farmers fail. Bank your surplus and you get market interest, but nothing for your knowledge and experience. The money ought to be put into new teams and the latest machines, and after that into breaking new land. If you make a profit on two hundred acres, you'll increase it by a third when you break a hundred acres more, not to mention what you save by working on a larger scale. Well, I see what could be done with a united Allenwood where every man worked jointly with the rest; but the settlement needs a head."

"It has one. Colonel Mowbray is not likely to give up his place," Hester answered.

"He may not be able to keep it. There's another claimant — this fellow Davies, and he's not a fool. I can't tell you yet whether I'll make a third. It wants thinking over."

The others did not reply. They agreed that the matter demanded careful thought. After a short silence, Hester changed the subject.

"I saw Mrs. Broadwood to-day, and she told me that

Miss Mowbray had gone East for the summer. As she had spoken about staying at Allenwood all the year, Mrs. Broadwood was surprised."

Harding betrayed his interest by an abrupt movement, yet he made no answer. On the whole the news was encouraging. He would miss Beatrice, but, on the other hand, it looked as if she had gone away to avoid him, and she would not have done so had she been unmoved by what he said to her. He regretted that he had driven her away; of course he might be mistaken, but there was hope in the suspicion he entertained.

"Well," he said, after a minute or two, "I'll go along and fix that boiler."

CHAPTER XV

HARVEST HOME

IT was a good summer at Allenwood, for the June rains were prolonged. The mornings broke cool and breezy, but, as a rule, at noon the clouds which had sailed eastward singly began to gather in compact banks. Then would come a roll of thunder and a deluge that might last an hour, after which the prairie lay bright in the sunshine until evening fell. The grass rippled across the waste in waves of vivid green, with flowers tossing beneath the gusts like wreaths of colored foam. Wild barley raised its spiky heads along the trails, and in the hollows the natural hay grew rank and tall. No sand blew from the bare ridges to cut the tender grain, which shot up apace and belted the prairie with its darker verdure.

Harding found full scope for his energies. He worked late and early in the fierce July heat. He had bought heavy horses because he could not reap by steam, and he had to build barns and stables of ship-lap lumber. Then there was prairie hay to cut, and after stripping the nearer hollows he must drive far across the plain to seek grass long enough in the sloos where the melted snow had run in the spring. This brought him into collision with Mowbray, who came upon him one morning driving a mower through dusty grass which the Colonel had marked down for his own. Perhaps what annoyed the old man most was to see

the American using an extra horse and a knife that would cut a wider swath than any at Allenwood. He thought this a sign of the grasping spirit of the times.

Mowbray contended that the grass was his, because it had long been cut for use at the Grange; and Harding replied that, as the land was unoccupied, neither had any prescriptive right and the hay could be harvested by the firstcomer. When the Colonel grew angry, Harding yielded the point and suggested that the sloos be mown turn about. To this Mowbray agreed reluctantly, because he saw he could not keep in front of a rival who had with perverse unfairness provided himself with better implements.

After the hay was gathered Harding's new buildings had to be roofed, and when the house grew insufferably hot Hester baked and cooked and washed in a lean-to shed.

In the meanwhile, the grain was ripening fast, and when the riotous Northwest wind began to die away the oats turned lemon and silver, and the wheat burnished gold. The mornings were now sharply cold, and as the green sunset faded the air grew wonderfully bracing.

Harding and Devine had been working steadily for fourteen hours a day, but they must nerve themselves for a last tense effort. After the great crop had been hauled to the elevators there would be time to rest, but until this was done the strain both were feeling must be borne. The new binders were got out when the Ontario harvesters, who had been engaged by Harding's agents, began to arrive, bringing with them a Chinese cook. Western harvesters are generously fed, and Harding would not have his sister overtaxed.

Soon after he started his harvest, Beatrice returned from Toronto. It was late afternoon when she drew near Allenwood. She was tired with the long journey, but she did not object when Lance made a round which would take them past Harding's farm. He said the longer trail was smoother.

The sun hung large and red on the horizon; the air was clear; and the crimson light raked the great field of grain. In the foreground the stooked sheaves, standing in long ranks, cast blue shadows across the yellow stubble; farther back the tall wheat ran, it seemed, right across the plain, shining in the sunset like burnished copper. Above the crimson on the prairie's edge the sky was coldly green.

At first it was the magnitude of the field and its glow of color that struck the girl. Harvest scenes were not new to her, and, indeed, she seldom gazed on one without feeling stirred; but she had never seen a harvest like this. It filled her with a sense of Nature's bounty and the fruitfulness of the soil, but as her eyes grew accustomed to the glaring light she noticed signs of human activity. The splendid crop had not sprung up of itself. It was the reward of anxious thought and sturdy labor, and she began to appreciate the bold confidence of the man who had planted it.

Along the wall of wheat moved a row of machines, marshaled in regular order and drawn by dusty teams. She could see by the raw paint that most of them were new; and, leaning back in her seat, she listened to their rhythmic clink. Noting their even distance, and the precision with which the sheaves they flung aside rose in stooks behind them, she saw that there was nothing haphazard here. The measured beat of this activity

showed the firm control of a master mind. No effort was wasted: action had its destined result; and behind this thought she had a half-conscious recognition of man's working in harmony with Nature's exact but beneficent laws. Duly complied with, they had covered the waste with grain. Glancing across it, the girl felt a curious thrill. The primeval curse had proved a blessing; seed-time and harvest had not failed; and here, paid for by the sweat of earnest effort, was an abundance of bread.

Moved as she was, she had a practical as well as an imaginative mind, and she noted the difference between Harding's and the Allenwood methods. What he had told her was true: her friends could not stand against such forces as he directed.

"It's worth looking at," Lance remarked. "I wanted you to see it because Harding's being talked about just now. I can't explain how he has broken so much ground with the means at his command, but it's a triumph of organization and ability."

"I suppose Father isn't pleased?"

Lance laughed as he flicked up his horses.

"That hardly expresses it. I rather think he regards our friend's industry as a dangerous example; but he's most of all surprised. He fully expected to see Harding ruined."

Just then one of the binders stopped, and its driver raised his hand. The machines behind swung round him as they came up and fell into line again while he busied himself with his team. A few moments later he mounted a big, barebacked Clydesdale that came at a clumsy gallop through the stubble and passed on down the trail.

"It's Harding," said Beatrice. "He must have run out of twine."

"I don't think so," Lance answered. "Harding's not the man to run out of anything. It's more likely a bolt has broken, and he's going for another; he'll have duplicates on hand."

Beatrice did not wish to appear curious about their neighbor, but she asked one or two cautious questions as they drove on.

"Well," said Lance, "though our experiments are not exactly popular, several of us are trying to copy him in a modest way, and I'm glad I let him do some breaking for me by steam. The Colonel was disagreeable about it, but he admitted my right to do as I liked; and the result is that I have a crop partly stooked up that will make it easy to pay Harding off, and leave me some money in hand."

"What do you mean by paying Harding off?" Beatrice asked sharply.

Lance looked confused.

"I didn't intend to mention it — you'll keep it to yourself. I'd got into a bit of a mess shortly before I was hurt at the ravine, and Harding paid up the money-lender I'd gone to in Winnipeg. What's more, he beat the fellow down, so that I only had to account for what I actually got."

"Ah!" said Beatrice. "Now I understand your restlessness when you were ill. But on what terms did Harding lend you the money?"

"He made only one condition: that I wouldn't take another bet until I was free again. Of course, I shall insist on paying him interest. Harding's a remarkably fine fellow, and I mean to stick to him."

Beatrice felt troubled by the keenness of her gratitude. She was fond of Lance, but she knew his weaknesses, and she saw that Harding had rendered him a great service. Moreover, she thought Lance's admiration for the man was justified. He had turned the lad out of a path that led through quagmires and set him on firm ground; his influence would be for good.

Lance gave her the news of the settlement; and when the lights of the Grange shone out through the creeping dark, everything else was forgotten in the pleasure of reaching home.

Three weeks later, when the thrasher had gone and the stooked sheaves had vanished, leaving only the huge straw wheat bins towering above the stubble, Harding drove to the Grange one evening with Hester and Devine. He had not entered the house for several months, and felt diffident about the visit, but Lance had urged him to come. The Allenwood Harvest Home was, he said, a function which everybody in the neighborhood was expected to attend. Besides, they had been fortunate in getting a clergyman from a distant settlement to take the service, and he was worth hearing.

The days were shortening rapidly, and when the party reached the Grange a row of lamps were burning in the hall. The moose heads had gone, and in their place sheaves of grain adorned the walls. Between the sheaves were festoons of stiff wheat ears and feathery heads of oats, warm bronze interspersed with cadmium and silver, and garlands of dry, blue flax. All had been arranged with taste, and the new flag that draped the reading desk made a blotch of vivid crimson among the harmonies of softer color. A tall,

silver lamp behind the desk threw its light on the ruddy folds, and Harding, glancing at it, felt a certain admiring thrill. That symbol was honored at Allenwood, standing as it did for great traditions, and peace and order and justice had followed it to the West, but it was not for nothing that the new country had quartered the Beaver of Industry on its crimson field.

He was shown a place with his companions, and Mowbray gave him a nod of recognition. Harding felt that the Colonel had proclaimed a truce while they met for thanksgiving. Lance and several others smiled at him as he quietly looked about in search of Beatrice, whom he could not see. The hall was filled with handsome, brown-skinned men, and there was something fine, but in a sense exotic, in their bearing and in the faces of the women.

All rose respectfully when a young man in white surplice and colored hood came in. He had a strong, clean-cut face, and carried himself well, but his manner was quietly reverent. Harding felt that these people from the Old Country knew how things should be done, and he had a curious sense of kinship with them. It was as if he were taking part in something familiar; though this was the first Anglican service he had attended.

A man at the rather battered grand piano struck a few chords, and Harding saw Beatrice when the opening hymn began. She stood a few yards away, but her voice reached him plainly. It was, he recognized, singularly sweet and clear, though he knew nothing of the training and study that had developed it. He could pick it out from the others, and as he

listened his lips quivered and a mistiness gathered in his eyes. Harding was not, as a rule, particularly imaginative or sensitive, but he was capable at times of a strange emotional stirring.

"The sower went forth sowing,
The seed in secret slept."

He had heard it sung before, and it had meant little to him, but now he saw how true it was in a stern, practical sense.

"Through weeks of faith and patience!"

Well, there was need of both, when glaring skies withheld all moisture and withering winds swept the dead, gray waste. This year, however, the prairie had blossomed under the genial warmth and rain. Bounty was the note that the tall green wheat had struck. But the voice he loved sang on:

"Within an hallowed acre,
He sows yet other grain."

The emotion he felt grew keener; memories awoke, and a line from Longfellow ran through his mind, "Her mother's voice, singing in Paradise." He heard the hymn, grasping its impressive analogy while he thought of the strong, brave, patient woman who had upheld his easy-going father at his uncongenial task. Harding knew now what he owed his mother. He had, indeed, known it long, but love had quickened all his senses and given him a clearer vision.

When the music stopped, he set himself to listen, with Beatrice's face seen now and then in delicate profile. He saw that Psalm and Lesson and Collect

were chosen well, and that the order of these people's prayers, with all its aids of taste and music, was not a mere artistic formula. It was the embroidered sheath that held the shining sword.

Harding, however, was not the only one to feel an emotional quickening, for there were those at Allenwood whose harvest thanksgiving was poignant with regret. It reminded them too keenly of the quiet English countryside where autumn mists crept among the stubble; of an ancient church with stained glass windows and memorial brasses to those who bore their name; of some well-loved, now sleeping beneath the sod. After all, they were exiles, and though they had found a good country, the old one called to them.

Mrs. Mowbray's face was sad, and her husband, who sat beside her, looked unusually stern.

Beatrice, with all the rich imagery of harvest before her eyes and in her ears, was thinking of one great wheatfield, and of the man who had reclaimed it from the wilderness. She had seen him come in, and had noticed that he looked worn. His figure was somewhat fined down and his face was thin. It was a strong face and an attractive one; the character it reflected was wholesome. There was nothing about the prairie man to suggest the ascetic, yet Beatrice vaguely realized that strenuous toil and clean ambition had driven the grosser passions out of him.

The clergyman walked to the flag-draped pulpit, and Beatrice tried to collect her wandering thoughts. As he read out the text she started, for it seemed strangely apposite.

"He that soweth little shall reap little; but he that soweth plenteously shall reap plenteously."

She suspected him of no desire to attack the customs of his congregation, for he must be ignorant of the line they took at Allenwood, but his words were edged with biting truth. At first he spoke of the great lonely land they had entered: a land that was destined to become one of the world's granaries and, better still, a home for the outcast and the poor. They, the pioneers, had a special duty and a privilege — to break the way for the host that should come after them; and of them was demanded honest service. To sow plenteously; to be faithful in the minor things — choosing the wheat that ripened early and escaped the frost, filling the seeder with an open hand, sparing no effort, and practising good husbandry; and withal blazing the trail by marks of high endeavor, so that all who followed it could see.

Then he spoke of the fruitful season and the yield of splendid grain. The soil had returned them in full measure what they had sown, and he pleaded that of this bounty they should give what they could spare. In the Old Country which they loved there were many poor, and now in time of stagnant trade the cities heard the cry of hungry children. There was one institution which, sowing with generous recklessness, sent none away unfed, and he begged that they would give something of their surplus.

He stopped, and Hester looked at Harding as the closing hymn began, showing him the edge of a dollar in her glove.

"Craig," she whispered, "have you any money?"

He pressed three bits of paper into her hand, and, noticing the figures on the margin of one, she gave him a surprised glance. His face was unusually gentle,

and there was a smile on it. She made a sign of approval and softly doubled up the bills as she joined in the singing.

Five minutes later the congregation went out into the open air, and Harding heard Mowbray press the clergyman to remain.

"I'm sorry, but as I'm to preach at Poplar on Sunday, I must make Sandhill Lake to-night," he answered. "In fact, I must get away at once; there's no moon and the trail is bad."

He climbed into his rig, and Harding, knowing there was a twenty-mile journey before him with a dangerous ford on the way, watched him drive off into the dark with a feeling of admiration. When he next heard about the man it was that he had been found in winter, returning from a distant Indian reservation, snow-blind and starving, with hands and feet frozen.

While Harding was looking for Hester, Mrs. Mowbray came up to him.

"You must stay with the others for our supper and dance," she said. "I have made your sister promise. I think we can sink all differences to-night."

Harding smiled.

"I can't refuse. Somehow I feel that the differences aren't so great as I once supposed."

"Perhaps that's true," Mrs. Mowbray answered thoughtfully. "Though I dare say you and my husband must disagree about the means you use, you have, after all, a good deal in common. One's object is the most important thing."

She left him as Kenwyne came up, and went to speak to one of her neighbors.

Mowbray had called Beatrice into his study.

"Count this for me," he said, giving her a brass tray filled with paper currency and silver coin. "I promised I'd send it to the bank, and I may as well make out the form before I lock the money up."

He went away to get a pen, and on coming back he looked surprised when Beatrice told him the amount.

"There must be a mistake," he said. "We have never collected so much before."

"I've counted it twice." Beatrice indicated three bills. "Though I think everybody was generous, these perhaps explain the difference."

"Consecutive numbers and all fresh; from the same person obviously," Mowbray said and put down the bills. "Bad taste on my part and, in a way, a breach of confidence, but you had seen them and I was surprised." Then he counted and sealed up the money.

The supper was served in a big, wooden barn, which was afterward cleared for dancing, and it was some time before Harding had an opportunity for speaking to Beatrice. She could not avoid him all the evening, and she did not wish to do so, but she was glad that he met her without embarrassment.

"I've learned that you got Lance out of trouble," she said after they had talked a while. "One way and another, he's deeply in your debt."

"Did he tell you?" Harding asked with a slight frown.

"No; that is, it slipped out, and I took advantage of the indiscretion." Beatrice looked at him steadily. "It has made a difference to the boy; I imagine he was at a dangerous turning, and you set him straight."

"You must tell nobody else."

"Do you always try to hide your good deeds?"

"I can't claim that they're numerous," Harding answered with a smile. "Anyway, I had a selfish motive on this occasion; you see, I enjoy beating a mortgage man."

Beatrice knew the explanation was inadequate, but she was grateful for his reserve. He was very generous, as she had another proof, for she knew who had given the three large bills which had surprised her father. There was, however, nothing more to be said, and she chatted about indifferent matters until she was called away.

Before the gathering broke up, Harding found himself seated in a corner of the big hall talking quietly to Mrs. Mowbray. She was interested in his farming plans and the changes he wanted made, and she listened carefully, noting how his schemes revealed his character. Now and then she asked a question, and he was surprised at her quick understanding. Moreover, he felt that he had her sympathy, so far as she could loyally give it. When, at length, he went away Mrs. Mowbray sat alone for some minutes quietly thinking. She could find no opening for hostile criticism. The honesty of the man's motives and his obvious ability appealed to her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BRIDGE

THERE had been rain since harvest, and the ground was soft when Harding and his comrade stood beside their smoking teams on the slope of the ravine. Pale sunshine streamed down between the leafless trees, glistening upon the pools and wet wheel-ruts that marked the winding trail. The grade was steep and the torn-up surface was badly adapted for heavy loads. Harding frowned as he glanced at the double span of foul-coated horses harnessed to a wagon filled with bags of grain. They were powerful, willing animals, and it jarred on him to overdrive them, as he had been forced to do. Besides, except for the steep ascent, he could have taken his load to the elevators with a single team.

"I hate to abuse good horses, but we must get up," he said when he had recovered breath. "Watch out the wagon doesn't run back when we make a start."

Devine drove a birch log behind the wheels and then ran to the leaders' heads and cracked his whip, while Harding called to the pole-team. For a few moments the battering hoofs churned up the sloppy trail and the wagon groaned and shook, the horses floundering and slipping without moving it. Then with a harsh creak the high wheels began to turn and they slowly struggled up the hill. Harness rattled, chain and

clevis rang, the steam from the toiling animals rose in a thin cloud, and white smears streaked their coats as they strained at the collar. The men were red in face and panting hard, but as they fought the grade they broke into breathless shouts. Harding was sparing of the whip; but this was not a time to be weakly merciful, when the load might overpower his teams and, running back, drag them over the edge. Nor dare he stop again and subject the animals to the cruel effort of restarting. They must get up somehow before their strength gave out.

Running with hand upon the bridle, and splashing in the pools, he rushed the horses at the last ascent; and then threw himself down with labored breath in the grass.

"This won't do," he panted after a few moments. "We'll have to put up five or six bags less, and you can figure how many extra loads that will make before we empty the bins. Then, I hate to keep a man and team standing by here when they could be hauling another load."

"It's one of the things a prairie farmer runs up against," Devine remarked.

"Just so. When they can't be put right, you have got to make the best of them; but this grade can be altered."

"It might," Devine agreed with a doubtful air. "Do you think you can persuade the Colonel to join you?"

"No; but it's my duty to try. When you have helped Frank up, you can take the extra team and haul in the cordwood. I'll be back from the railroad about dark to-morrow."

In the meanwhile, Kenwyne, Broadwood, and Lance Mowbray stood among the trees about three miles farther down the ravine, looking at the trail to Allenwood, which led along its edge. Near it the ground fell sharply to the creek, but the slope was regular, and small trees, blazed with the ax at intervals, marked a smooth descending line. On the opposite side, a gully offered an approach to the prairie at an easy gradient.

"We must have the bridge here; but it isn't a job we can manage without assistance," said Kenwyne. "I don't want to be disrespectful, Lance, but I hope your father enjoyed his lunch."

Lance grinned.

"As a matter of fact, he did; but unfortunately he read the paper afterwards and the market report seemed to upset him. To make things worse, I rashly mentioned that it bore out Harding's prognostications. In consequence, I expect you'll need all the tact you've got."

"I wish Harding had a little more," Broadwood remarked. "I can be meek, when it's for the good of the settlement, but our friend's too blunt."

"If he's blunt to-day, there'll be trouble," Lance replied with a chuckle. "I imagine the Colonel's in fighting form. Here he comes!"

It was in an unusually thoughtful mood that Mowbray rode toward them. The steady fall in the price of wheat was sufficient to cause him anxiety, but he had further grounds for feeling disturbed. There was an unsettling influence at work at Allenwood; plans were being mooted which he thought originated with Harding; and, worse than all, he suspected that

his household was not altogether with him. Gerald certainly showed unexpected sense in denouncing the innovations; but Mowbray had doubts about Beatrice, who seemed to be cultivating Miss Harding's acquaintance; and even his wife now and then took the part of the offender. Besides, there were, so to speak, portents of change in the air, and Mowbray felt that he was being driven where he did not mean to go. He blamed Harding for this, and thought it was time he put a stop to the fellow's encroachments. For all that, he greeted the waiting men pleasantly when he dismounted.

"The days are getting colder, but it's a bracing afternoon," he said. "Now, perhaps we'd better walk over the line of the proposed trail."

They took him along the side of the ravine, and Kenwyne, stopping now and then, drew his attention to a plan he carried.

"We'll need about forty feet of log underpinning at this point, and you'll see that it's provided for," he said. "On the next section there's a good deal of soil to move; I have an estimate of the number of wagon loads." Farther on he stopped again. "From here to the bridge it will come to only a ton for every three or four yards."

Mowbray studied the plan and some sheets of figures.

"You seem to have thought the matter out very carefully," he commented.

"It needed close attention," said Broadwood.

Mowbray looked at the men keenly.

"There's a comprehensiveness about these plans and calculations that I did not expect from you," he said

dryly. "To tell the truth, I'm somewhat surprised by them."

They did not answer this, and Kenwyne frowned in warning as he saw Lance's amused expression.

"The trail would be useful, sir," Broadwood urged.

"I think so. Do you feel competent to make it? The scheme is bolder than anything of the kind we have undertaken."

"We couldn't attempt it alone. Our idea is to ask for a general levy."

Mowbray nodded, for when they improved the roads at Allenwood the settlers were called upon to supply labor or money according to the size of their farms.

"By making an effort we might get the trail cut and the bridge built before the frost stops us," Kenwyne said. "We couldn't finish the grading, but the snow would give us a pretty good surface for hauling our wheat over. The new crossing would save us nearly three miles on the journey to the railroad, and we ought to get a good load up the easier incline without doubling the teams."

Mowbray's suspicions grew.

"We have not found the longer distance an insurmountable disadvantage so far. Why should it trouble you so much now?"

"Some of us have bigger crops this year," Broadwood said.

"Do you think this justifies your taxing your neighbors?"

"No," Broadwood answered incautiously. "We expect they'll follow our example, and have as much grain as we have next season."

"I see!" Mowbray frowned. "You are working

for a change. The system we have followed so far doesn't satisfy you."

"But you cannot imagine, sir, that there's any danger to the settlement in our growing better crops."

"Of course not. It's the taint of commercialism I object to. However, let me look at those estimates again."

They had now nearly reached the top of the hill on the opposite side and Mowbray, sitting down on a birch log, opened the papers. The others looked at one another dubiously as they heard a beat of hoofs and a rattle of wheels.

"I notice no allowance for unexpected difficulties, which are bound to crop up," Mowbray presently remarked. "The work will, as usually happens, prove harder than it looks. I do not see how you can finish it before the frost comes."

"We expect to get it done, sir," Kenwyne replied. "In fact, we ventured to ask Mr. Harding, who has helped us to work the scheme out, to meet you here. He will be able to give you any information."

"Ah!"

Looking up, Mowbray saw Harding coming down the trail, and the loaded wagon and the fine Clydesdale horses standing among the trees. The sight angered him. Harding had not been ruined by his rash experiment, as Mowbray had honestly believed would happen. On the contrary, he had prospered, and Mowbray suspected him of a wish to flaunt his success in the faces of his less fortunate neighbors. It was in a very uncompromising mood that he waited for him to speak.

"If I can get the help I want from Allenwood,

I'll engage to cut this trail on the terms of the estimates," Harding said. "If extra labor is required, I'll provide it. You can see the advantages, Colonel Mowbray: three miles saved on the journey to the elevators, besides doing away with the need for using an extra team on the grade. You'll save a dollar or two a load; on a big crop the difference will be striking. The trail will pay for itself in one season."

"I notice that you confine yourself to the monetary point of view," said Mowbray.

"I think not. There are other advantages, but I won't speak of them now; I'd be glad to explain anything about the work."

Mowbray's face hardened. The intruding fellow had insolently declined to talk over any but the material benefits to be expected. It looked as if he attached no importance to his opinions; and in one respect Mowbray was not mistaken. Harding had ideas of progress, mutual help, and good fellowship with which he did not expect the Colonel to sympathize.

"I do not propose to ask any questions," Mowbray said, getting up and giving Kenwyne the plans. "I needn't keep you; this work will not be undertaken with my sanction."

"But it can't be undertaken without it!" Broadwood protested.

"I agree with you. On such matters as a general levy I have power of veto, and I must warn you that it will be used."

Harding turned away, somewhat red in face, and went back up the trail. He recovered his good hu-

mor, however, when he started his horses and walked beside them across the withered grass. The prairie was bright with sunshine, and the wide outlook was cheering. Faint wavy lines of trees and glistening ponds checkered the great plain; there was not a house or trail of smoke on it. It was all raw material, ready for him and others to make good use of.

Presently a buggy appeared over a rise, and Harding felt a thrill of pleasure as he recognized the team and the driver. When Beatrice reached him she checked the horses.

"You're going to the elevators with your grain?" she said. "How is it you came by the Long Bluff?"

"I went round by Willow Gulch in the ravine."

"Then you went to meet Kenwyne and Broadwood where the new trail is to cross? I've heard something about the matter."

"I did. And I'm afraid I offended Colonel Mowbray."

"So he has stopped the undertaking! I expected it."

"No," said Harding, with a half-humorous air. "The trail will be made, though I won't be able to begin this season."

Beatrice looked thoughtful.

"I'm sorry about this," she said; "it may cause more trouble. Why can't you leave us alone?"

"I'm afraid I am meddlesome. But it's hard to leave things alone when you know they ought to be done."

"That sounds egotistical. Are you never mistaken?"

"Often, but it's generally when I get to planning what I'd like to do."

"I don't quite understand."

"It would certainly be egotistical if I bored you with my crude ideas," he answered, smiling.

"Never mind that. I want to know."

"Well," he said, "sometimes you look about to see how you can alter matters and what plans you can make; but when they're made they won't always work. It's different when you don't have to look."

Beatrice had a dim perception of what he meant, but she would let him explain. His point of view interested her; though she knew that she ran some risk in leading him into confidential talk.

"I don't think you have made it very clear yet."

"I meant that there are times when you see your work ready laid out. It's there; you didn't plan it — you simply can't mistake it. Then if you go straight ahead and do the best you can, you can't go wrong."

"But when you don't feel sure? When you haven't the conviction that it is your task?"

"Then," he said quietly, "I think it's better to sit tight and wait. When the time to act comes, you certainly will know."

Beatrice pondered this, because it seemed to apply with some force to herself. He had once urged her to take a daring course, to assert her freedom at the cost of sacrificing much that she valued. Though she had courage, she had shrunk from the venture, because she had not the firm conviction that it was justified. She felt drawn to Harding; indeed, she had met no other man whom she liked so well; but there was much against him, and nothing but deep, unquestion-

ing love would warrant her marrying him. That she felt such love she would not admit. It was better to take the advice he had given her and wait. This was the easier for her to do because she believed that he had no suspicion of her real feeling for him.

"After all," she said, smiling, "your responsibility ends with yourself. I don't see why you should interfere with other people. You can farm your land as you think fit, without trying to make us copy you."

"That sounds all right; but when you come to think of it, you'll see that neither of us can stand alone."

"We got along pretty well before you came."

"I don't doubt it. The trouble is that what was best a few years ago isn't best now. I wish I could make your father realize that."

"Does it follow that he's mistaken because he doesn't agree with you?"

Harding laughed.

"If I were singular in my way of thinking, I'd be more modest, but all over the country farmers are getting ready for the change. There's a big expansion in the air, and your people can't stand out against it."

"Then I suppose we'll be crushed, and we'll deserve our fate." Beatrice smiled at him as she started the horses. "But at least it will not be from lack of advice!"

CHAPTER XVII

A HEAVY BLOW

SNOW was drifting around the Grange before a bitter wind when Mowbray sat in his study with a stern, anxious face. The light of the lamp on his writing table fell upon a black-edged letter that lay beside a bundle of documents; the big stove in a corner glowed a dull red, and acrid fumes of burning wood escaped as the icy draughts swept in. Mowbray's hands and feet were very cold, but he sat motionless, trying to rally his forces after a crushing blow.

The sound of music reached him from the hall, where some of his younger neighbors were spending the evening, and he frowned when an outbreak of laughter followed the close of a song. He had left his guests half an hour before, when the mounted mail-carrier had called, and he could not force himself to rejoin them yet. He must have time to recover from the shock he had received. Since he left the hall he had been trying to think; but he had no control of his mind and was conscious of only a numbing sense of grief and disaster.

He looked up as his wife came in. Her movements were generally quiet, and when she sat down her expression was calm.

"I got away as soon as I could," she said. "I am afraid you have had bad news."

"Very bad. Godfrey's dead!"

Mrs. Mowbray started. Godfrey Barnett was her husband's cousin. He had been the managing director of an old-established private bank in which Mowbray's relatives were interested, and the dividend upon some of the shares formed an important part of the Colonel's income.

"I'm very sorry," Mrs. Mowbray said softly. "Godfrey was always a favorite of mine. But it must have been sudden; you did not know that he was ill."

Her heart sank as she saw her husband's face turn grim. The blow had been heavier than she thought.

"He said something about not being up to his usual form when he last wrote, and Alan alludes to a cablegram that should have prepared me, but I never got it. No doubt it was overlooked. He mentions that the strain was almost unbearable — the crisis at the office — and the inquest."

"The inquest!"

The Colonel took up an English newspaper.

"It's all here; Alan says there's nothing to add. I've been trying to understand it, but I can't quite realize it yet. The paper and the letter came together. I suppose he waited a few days, thinking he had cabled."

The Colonel paused, and Mrs. Mowbray gave him a sympathetic glance, for she knew what his forced calm cost. The Mowbrays were stern and quiet under strain.

"Well?" she said.

"They found Godfrey dead, with a bottle of some

narcotic beside him. The doctor gave evidence that he had prescribed the drug; it seems Godfrey couldn't sleep and his nerves had gone to bits. The man was obviously tactful and saved the situation. The verdict was that Godfrey had accidentally taken too large a dose."

"Ah! You don't think ——"

"I dare not think — he was my cousin." Mowbray shivered and pulled himself together. "Now for the sequel. You haven't heard the worst yet, if one can call what follows worse."

"Don't tell me. Give me the paper."

He handed her the journal published in an English country town and she read the long account with a feeling of deep pity. It appeared that when news of Godfrey's death spread there had been a run on the bank. Barnett's business was for the most part local; and struggling shopkeepers, farmers, small professional men, and a number of the country gentry hurried to withdraw their money. The firstcomers were paid, but the bank soon closed its doors. Then came the inquest, and Mrs. Mowbray wondered how the merciful verdict had been procured. It was all very harrowing, and when she looked up her eyes were wet.

"He must have known!" she said. "It seems heartless to talk about the financial side of the matter, but ——"

"It must be talked about, and it's easier than the other. I think I know why the bank came down, and perhaps I'm responsible to some extent. When one of the big London amalgamations wanted to absorb Barnett's, Godfrey consulted me. I told him I wasn't

a business man, but so far as my opinion went he ought to refuse."

"Why?"

"Barnett's was a small, conservative bank. Godfrey knew his customers; he was their financial adviser and often their personal friend. The bank would take some risk to carry an honest client over bad times; it was easy with the farmers after a poor harvest. Godfrey could give and take; he managed a respected firm like a gentleman. In short, Barnett's was human, not a mere money-making machine."

"I can imagine that," Mrs. Mowbray responded. "Would it have been different if he had joined the amalgamation?"

"Very different. Barnett's would have become a branch office without power of discretion. Everything would have had to be done on an unchangeable system — the last penny exacted; no mercy shown a client who might fall a day behind; one's knowledge of a customer disregarded in favor of a rule about the security he could offer. I warned Godfrey that so far as my influence could command it, every vote that went with the family shares should be cast against the deal; although the amalgamation had given him a plain hint that they meant to secure a footing in the neighborhood, whether they came to terms with Barnett's or not."

Mrs. Mowbray thought his advice to his cousin was characteristic of her husband, and, in a wide sense, she agreed with him. He was a lover of fair play and individual liberty; but the course Godfrey had taken was nevertheless rash. Barnett's was not strong enough to fight a combination which had prac-

tically unlimited capital. The struggle had no doubt been gallant, but the kindly, polished gentleman had been disastrously beaten. What was worse, Mrs. Mowbray suspected that her husband was now leading a similar forlorn hope at Allenwood.

"I suppose it means a serious loss to us," she said.

"That's certain. Alan has not had time to investigate matters yet, but I gather that my relatives do not mean to shirk their responsibility. Barnett's, of course, was limited, but the name must be saved if possible and the depositors paid. I will tell Alan that I strongly agree with this."

It was rash and perhaps quixotic, but it was typical of the man, and Mrs. Mowbray did not object.

"I'm sorry for you," she said caressingly. "It will hit you very hard."

Mowbray's face grew gentler.

"I fear the heaviest burden will fall on your shoulders; we shall have to cut down expenses, and there's the future —— Well, I'm thankful you have your small jointure. Things are going hard against me, and I feel very old."

"It's unfortunate that my income is only a life interest. The boys ——"

"Gerald must shift for himself; he has had more than his share. I don't think we need be anxious about Lance. The boy seems to have a singularly keen scent for money."

"But Beatrice!"

"Beatrice," said Mowbray, "must make a good match. It shouldn't be difficult with her advantages. And now I suppose I'd better go down. I think the

effect of this disaster must remain a secret between us."

He locked up the papers and shortly afterward stood talking to Brand in a quiet corner of the hall.

"If it wouldn't be an intrusion, I'd like to offer you my sympathy, sir," Brand said. "The mail-carrier brought me a letter from my English steward."

"Thank you; it has been a shock. Did you deal with Barnett's?"

"I understand they have handled the estate accounts for many years."

"Then you will be relieved to hear that it's probable all the depositors will be paid."

Brand made a gesture of expostulation; but Mowbray's mind had taken a sudden turn.

"So you haven't disposed of your English property!" he commented.

Brand's glance rested on Beatrice, who was standing near, talking to one of the younger men. Her eyes sparkled with amusement and there was warm color in her face. Her pose was light and graceful; she seemed filled with eager gaiety, and Brand's expression hardened.

"No," he replied in a meaning tone; "I may want the place some day. Perhaps I'd better warn you that I haven't given up hope yet, in spite of my rebuff."

"I wish she'd taken you," Mowbray said frankly. "It would have been a relief to me; but I cannot influence her."

Glancing back at Beatrice, Brand was seized by a fit of passion. He was a strong, reserved man, who had cared little for women — he had, indeed, rather

despised them. Now he had fallen in love at forty-two, and had been swept away. Hitherto he had generally lived up to a simple code of honor; but restraints were breaking down. He would have the girl, whatever it cost him or her. He knew the strength of his position. It might be necessary to exercise patience, but the odds were on his side.

"This is a matter I must fight out for myself," he said in a hard voice. "And I mean to win."

Mowbray looked at him in surprise. There was something new and overbearing in the man's expression which the Colonel resented, but he supposed he must make allowances.

"You have my good wishes," he said; "but you must understand that that's as far as I can go."

He moved away and soon afterward Brand joined Beatrice.

"I must congratulate you on your cheerfulness," he smiled. "You seem to cast a ray of brightness about the place to-night. It drew me. Being of a cold nature I felt I'd like to bask in the genial warmth."

Beatrice laughed.

"That sounds stilted; one doesn't expect such compliments from you."

"No," Brand said with a direct glance. "I'm old and sober; but you don't know what I'm capable of when I'm stirred."

"I'm not sure that I'm curious. To tell the truth, it costs me rather an effort to be gay to-night. Somehow, there's a feeling of trouble in the air."

Brand thought she had no knowledge of her father's misfortune — it was unlikely that Mowbray would tell

her; but she was clever enough to see the other troubles that threatened the Grange in common with most of the homesteads at Allenwood.

"So you face it with a laugh!" he said. "It's a gallant spirit; but I dare say the boys make it easier for you. Trouble doesn't seem to touch them."

He looked about the hall, noting the careless bearing of the handsome, light-hearted young men and the three or four attractive girls. Their laughter was gay, their voices had a spirited ring, and the room was filled with warmth and brightness; yet he felt the presence of an ominous shadow. This afforded him a certain gloomy satisfaction, the meanness of which he recognized. He knew that he could not win the girl he desired by his personal merits, but the troubles he thought were coming might give him his opportunity.

Beatrice was presently glad of an excuse for dismissing him, and when the others had gone she went to her father, who was standing moodily by the hearth.

"You don't look well to-night," she said.

"I'm not ill."

"Then you're anxious."

"I must confess that I have something to think about."

"I know," said Beatrice. "Things look black just now. With the wheat market falling ——"

"What do you know about the market?" Mowbray asked in surprise.

"I read the newspapers and hear the boys talk. They're brave and take it carelessly, but one feels ——"

Mowbray gave her a keen glance.

"Well, what do you feel?"

"That I'd like to help you in any way I can. So far, I've taken all you have given me and done nothing in return."

"You can help," he answered slowly. "It would ease my mind if you married Brand."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Not that! I'm sorry, but it's impossible."

He made a gesture of resignation.

"Well, I can't force you."

Beatrice was silent a moment.

"It's hard to refuse the only big thing you have ever asked," she said hesitatingly. "I really want to help, and I feel humiliated when I see how little I can do. Mrs. Broadwood and Hester Harding can manage a farm; Broadwood says he only began to make money after he married." She paused, seeing Mowbray's frown, and went on with a forced smile: "However, I can at least cease to be an expense. I have cost you a great deal one way and another, and now you must give me nothing more."

"I'm afraid I may have to cut down your allowance," he answered gloomily.

"That's one thing I can save you." She looked at him with diffident eagerness. "I've been thinking a good deal lately, and I see that if wheat keeps getting cheaper it may be serious for us all. Couldn't we take precautions?"

"What kind of precautions?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that — I don't know enough about farming. But perhaps we could make some changes and economies; break more land, for example."

"If we lose on what we have broken already, how shall we economize by plowing more?"

"It sounds logical; but can't you save labor and reduce the average expense by working on a large scale?"

"Perhaps. But it needs capital."

"A few new horses and bigger plows wouldn't cost very much. We are spending a good deal of money on other things that are not directly useful."

Mowbray looked at her with an ironical smile and Beatrice felt confused. She remembered that she had staunchly defended her father's conservative attitude to Harding, and now she was persuading him to abandon it.

"This is a new line for you to take," he said. "I should like to know what has suggested it. Has Mrs. Broadwood converted you, or have you been talking to the Americans?"

"I meet Mr. Harding now and then, and he generally talks about farming."

"I suppose you can't avoid the fellow altogether, but politeness is all that is required. He has a habit of exaggerating the importance of things, and he can only look at them from his point of view."

Beatrice felt guilty. Her father had not forbidden her speaking to the man; he trusted her to remember what was due to her station. She could imagine his anger were he to suspect that she had allowed Harding to make love to her.

"Kenwyne and Broadwood seem to agree with him," she urged.

"They're rank pessimists; you mustn't listen to them. Try to be as economical as you can; but leave

these matters alone. You don't understand them."

She went to her room, feeling downcast. She had failed to influence him, but it was partly her fault that she had been unable to do so. She had wasted her time in idle amusements, and now she must take the consequences. Nobody except Harding would listen when she wished to talk about things that mattered. She felt ashamed of her ignorance and of her utter helplessness. But perhaps she might learn; she would ask Hester Harding to teach her.

CHAPTER XVIII

COVERING HIS TRAIL

IT was bitterly cold in the log-walled room at the back of the settlement store where Gerald Mowbray sat by the red-hot stove. His deerskin jacket and moccasins were much the worse for wear, and his face was thin and darkened by the glare of the snow. For the past month he had been traveling with a survey party through the rugged forest-belt of Northern Ontario, living in the open in Arctic weather, until the expedition had fallen back on the lonely settlement to get fresh supplies.

All round the rude log-shacks, small, ragged pines, battered by the wind, and blackened here and there by fire, rose from the deep snow that softened the harsh contour of the rocky wilderness. This is one of the coldest parts of Canada. The conifers that roll across it are generally too small for milling, and its penetration is remarkably difficult, but a silver vein accounted for the presence of a few hard-bitten miners. Occasionally they ran some risk of starving when fresh snow delayed the transport of provisions, and it was only at irregular intervals that a mail reached them. An Indian mail-carrier had, however, arrived shortly before the survey party, and Gerald had a letter in his hand, and a Montreal newspaper lay beside him. The

letter troubled him. He was thankful to be left alone for a few minutes, for he had much to think about.

Hardship and fatigue had no attractions for him, but he had grown tired of the monotony of his life at the Grange, and as qualified surveyors were not plentiful in the wilds, the authorities had been glad to obtain the services of an engineer officer. Though he was only an assistant, the pay was good, and he had thought it wise to place himself out of his creditors' reach. Unfortunately, some of the more persistent had learned where he had gone, and the letter contained a curt demand for the settlement of an account. Gerald could not pay it, but the newspaper brought a ray of hope. He had speculated with part of the money his father had once given him to pay his debts, and the mining shares he bought had turned out worthless. Now, however, they were unexpectedly going up; it seemed that the company had at last tapped a vein of promising ore. If he could hold out, he might be able to liquidate his most pressing debts. But this creditor's demand was peremptory and he could not see how he was to gain time. He wished the men whose harsh voices reached him from the store would stop talking. They were rough choppers, of whose society he had grown very tired; and the taciturn surveyor was not a much better companion.

The surveyor came in before Gerald found a solution of his difficulties. He was a big, gaunt man, Throwing off his ragged furs he sat down in a broken chair and lighted his pipe.

"Thermometer's at minus fifty, but we must pull out at sun-up," he remarked. "Now, as I have to run my corner-line as ordered and the grub we've been

able to get won't last long, I can't take all the boys and hunt for that belt of farming land."

"Supposititious, isn't it?" Gerald suggested. "We've seen nothing to indicate there being any soil up here that one could get a plowshare into. Still, the authorities have rather liberal ideas of what could be called cultivatable land."

"That's so," the surveyor agreed. "Where I was raised they used to say that a bushman can get a crop wherever he can fire the seed among the rocks with a shotgun. Anyway, the breeds and the Indians talk about a good strip of alluvial bottom, and we've got to find out something about it before we go back."

"It will be difficult to haul the stores and camp truck if you divide the gang."

"Sure; but here's my plan." The surveyor opened a rather sketchy map. "I take the sleds and follow the two sides of the triangle. I'll give you the base, and two packers. Marching light, by compass, you'll join me where the base-line meets the side; but you'll do no prospecting survey unless you strike the alluvial bottom."

"What about provisions?"

"You can carry enough to see you through; the cache I made in advance is within a few marches of where we meet."

It was not a task that appealed to Gerald. It would be necessary to cross a trackless wilderness which only a few of the Hudson Bay half-breeds knew anything about. He must sleep in the snow with an insufficient camp outfit, and live on cut-down rations, with the risk of starving if anything delayed him, because the weight he could transport without a sledge was limited.

He would have refused to undertake the journey only that a half-formed plan flashed into his mind.

"Suppose I miss you?" he suggested.

"Well," said the surveyor dryly, "that might mean trouble. You should get there first; but I can't stop long if you're late, because we've got to make the railroad while the grub holds out. Anyhow, I could leave you rations for two or three marches in a cache, and by hustling you should catch up."

Gerald agreed to this, and soon afterward he went to sleep on the floor. It was early in the evening, but he knew that the next eight or nine days' work would try him hard.

It was dark when the storekeeper wakened him, and after a hasty breakfast he went out with the surveyor. Dawn was breaking, and there was an ashy grayness in the east, but the sky was barred with clouds. The black pines were slowly growing into shape against the faint glimmer of the snow. The cold was piercing and Gerald shivered while the surveyor gave him a few last directions; then he slung his heavy pack upon his shoulders and set off down the unpaved street. There were lights in the log shacks and once or twice somebody greeted him, but after a few minutes the settlement faded behind and he and his companions were alone among the tangled firs. No sound but the crunch of snow beneath their big shoes broke the heavy silence; the small trees, slanting drunkenly, were dim and indistinct, and the solitude was impressive.

Gerald's lips were firmly set as he pushed ahead. Theoretically, his task was simple; he had only to keep a fixed course and he must cut the surveyor's line of

march, but in practise there were difficulties. It is not easy to travel straight in a rugged country where one is continually forced aside by natural obstacles; nor can one correctly allow for all the divergences. This, however, was not what troubled Gerald, for the plan he had worked out since the previous night did not include his meeting the surveyor. It was the smallness of the quantity of provisions his party could transport that he was anxious about, because he meant to make a much longer march than his superior had directed.

His companions were strong, stolid bushmen, whose business it was to carry the provisions and camp outfit. They knew nothing about trigonometry; but they were at home in the wilds, and Gerald was glad the weather threatened to prove cloudy. He did not want them to check his course by the sun. Properly, it was north-west; and he marched in that direction until it was unlikely that anybody from the settlement would strike his trail; then he headed two points farther west, and, seeing that the packers made no remark, presently diverged another point.

Traveling was comparatively easy all day. Wind and fire had thinned the bush, cleaning out dead trees and undergrowth, and the snow lay smooth upon the outcropping rock. Here and there they struck a frozen creek which offered a level road, and when dark came they had made an excellent march. Gerald was glad of this, because all the food he could save now would be badly needed before the journey was finished. For all that, he felt anxious as he sat beside the camp-fire after his frugal supper.

A bank of snow kept off the stinging wind; there was, fortunately, no lack of fuel, and, sitting close to

the pile of snapping branches, the men were fairly warm; but the dark pines were wailing mournfully and thick gloom encroached upon the narrow ring of light. The eddying smoke leaped out of it and vanished with startling suddenness. Gerald's shoulders ached from the weight of his pack, and the back of one leg was sore. He must be careful of it, because he had a long way to go, and men were sometimes lamed by snow-shoe trouble.

The two packers sat, for the most part, smoking silently. Gerald now and then gave them a pleasant word, but he did not wish their relations to become friendly, as it was not advisable that they should ask him questions about the march. Indeed, he shrank from thinking of it as he listened to the savage wind in the pine-tops and glanced at the surrounding darkness. The wilderness is daunting in winter, even to those who know it best; but Gerald with his gambler's instincts was willing to take a risk. If he went home with the surveyor, ruin awaited him.

For a time he sat drowsily enjoying the rest and warmth, and then, lying down on a layer of spruce-twigs, he went to sleep. But the cold wakened him. One of the packers got up, grumbling, and threw more branches on the fire, and Gerald went to sleep again.

Starting shortly before daylight, they were met by blinding snow, but they struggled on all day across a rocky elevation. The snow clogged their eyelashes and lashed their tingling cheeks until the pain was nearly unbearable; still, that was better than feeling them sink into dangerous insensibility. They must go on while progress was possible. The loss of a day

or two might prove fatal, and there was a chance of their getting worse weather.

It overtook them two days later when they sat shivering in camp with the snow flying past their heads and an icy blizzard snapping rotten branches from the buffeted trees. Twigs hurtled about their ears; the woods was filled with a roar like the sea; the smoke was blinding to lee of the fire, and its heat could hardly reach them a yard to windward. Gerald drank a quart of nearly boiling black tea, but he could not keep warm. There was no feeling in his feet, and his hands were too numbed to button his ragged coat, which had fallen open. When he tried to smoke, his pipe was frozen, and as he crouched beneath the snow-bank he wondered dully whether he should change his plans and face the worst his creditors could do.

By altering his course northerly when he resumed the march he might still strike the surveyor's line, but after another day or two it would be too late. Still, he thought of his father's fury and the shares that were bound to rise. If he were disowned, he must fall back upon surveying for a livelihood. It was unthinkable that he should spend the winter in the icy wilds, and the summer in portaging canoes over rocky hills and dragging the measuring chain through mosquito haunted bush. He could not see how he was to avoid exposure when Davies claimed his loan; but something might turn up, and he was sanguine enough to be content if he could put off the day of reckoning.

The blizzard continued the next morning and no one could leave camp; indeed, Gerald imagined that death would have struck down the strongest of them in

an hour. But the wind fell at night, and when dawn broke they set out again in Arctic frost. One could make good progress in the calm air, though the glitter was blinding when the sun climbed the cloudless sky as they followed a winding stream. Then a lake offered a smooth path, and they had made a good march when dark fell.

In the night it grew cloudy and the temperature rose, and when they started at daybreak they were hindered by loose, fresh snow. At noon they stopped exhausted after covering a few miles; and the next day the going was not much better, for they were forced to flounder through a tangle of blown-down trees. It was only here and there that the pines and spruces could find sufficient moisture among the rocks, and they died and fell across each other in a dry summer.

On the seventh day after leaving the settlement the three men plodded wearily through thin forest as the gloomy evening closed in. Their shoulders were sore from the pack-straps, the backs of their legs ached with swinging the big snowshoes, and all were hungry and moody. Provisions were getting low, and they had been compelled to cut down rations. Now the cold was Arctic, and a lowering, steel-gray sky showed between the whitened tops of the trees. The packers had been anxiously looking for blaze-marks all afternoon; and Gerald, knowing they would not find them, felt his courage sink. He was numb with cold, and he dully wondered whether he had taken too great a risk.

Presently one of the men, who had been searching some distance to the right, joined his comrade. They spoke together and then turned back to meet Gerald.

"Say, boss, isn't it time we struck the boys' tracks?" one asked.

"Yes," said Gerald, recognizing that much depended on how he handled the situation. "We should have picked them up this morning."

The men were silent for a moment.

"Looks as if we'd got off our line," one of them then said resolutely. "How were you heading?"

"Northwest, magnetic."

"No, sir. You were a piece to the west of that."

"You think so?"

The man laughed harshly.

"Sure! I was raised among the timber; guess I've broken too many trails not to know where I'm going."

"Well," said Gerald in a confidential tone, "I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to make you uneasy, but I'm afraid this compass is unreliable. It hasn't been swiveling as it ought; oil frozen on the cap, perhaps, or the card warped against the glass. I tried to adjust it once or twice, but my fingers were too cold." He held it out awkwardly for them to examine, and it dropped from his mittens. Clutching at it, he lost his balance and crushed the compass beneath the wooden bow of his shoe.

Then he stepped back with an exclamation, and the packer, dropping on his knees, groped in the snow until he brought out the compass with its case badly bent.

"You've fixed her for good this time; there's an old log where she fell," he said; and he and his comrade waited in gloomy silence while Gerald watched them.

They did not suspect him: the thing had passed for an accident; but Gerald felt daunted by the deadly cold and silence of the bush. His companions' faces

were indistinct and their figures had lost their sharpness; they looked shaggy and scarcely human in their ragged skin-coats.

One of the packers suddenly threw down his load.

"We're going to camp right here and talk this thing out," he said, and taking off his net shoe began to scrape up the snow.

Half an hour later they sat beside a snapping fire, eating morsels of salt pork and flinty bannocks out of a frying-pan, with a black pannikin of tea between them. The smoke went straight up; now and then a mass of snow fell from the bending needles with a soft thud, though there was scarcely a breath of wind.

"I reckon we've been going about west-northwest since we left the settlement," one of the men said to Gerald. "Where does that put you?"

"Some way to the south of where I meant to be. Twenty degrees off our line is a big angle; you can see how it lengthens the base we've been working along while McCarthy makes his two sides. That means we've lost most of our advantage in cutting across the corner. Then we were held up once or twice, and we'll probably be behind instead of ahead of him at the intersection of the lines. Tell me the distances you think we have made."

After some argument, they agreed upon them, and Gerald drew a rude triangle in the snow, though its base stopped short of joining one side.

"If you're right about course and distance, our position's somewhere here," he said, indicating the end of the broken line.

This placed the responsibility for any mistake upon his companions; but one of them had a suggestion.

"If we head a few points north, we'll certainly cut McCarthy's track."

"Yes; but we'd be behind him and he can't wait."

"Then if we stick to the line we're on, we'll join."

"If we run it far enough, but we'll have to go a long way first. It's difficult to catch a man who's marching as fast as you are when you have to converge at a small angle upon his track."

This was obvious as they looked at the diagram.

"What are you going to do about it?" one of the packers asked.

Gerald hesitated, because his plan might daunt them; moreover he must be careful not to rouse their suspicion.

"We want food first of all, and we'll have to sacrifice a day or two in finding the cache. To do so, we'll cut McCarthy's line; this won't be hard if he's blazed it."

"You'll follow him after you find the grub?"

"No," said Gerald, "I don't think so. He can't leave us much, and we'd probably use it all before we caught him up. The best thing we can do is to strike nearly north for the Hudson Bay post. We might get there before the food runs out."

There was silence for a few moments, and he waited for the others to speak, for he had carefully ascertained the position of the factory before he left the settlement. If they missed the remote outpost, or did not get there soon enough, they could not escape starvation.

"Well," said the first packer, "I guess that's our only plan, but we'll certainly have to hustle. Better get to sleep now. There'll be a moon in the early morning, and we'll pull out then."

Gerald made a sign of agreement. His companions had taken the direction of affairs into their own hands, and he was glad to leave it to them. It relieved him of responsibility, and they were not likely to blunder where error would be fatal. When they reached the factory he must find an excuse for remaining until McCarthy arrived at the settlements and reported the party missing. It would be mentioned in the papers, a relief expedition might be despatched, and Gerald's creditors would wait until the uncertainty about his fate was dissipated. He meant to delay his reappearance as long as possible; but he knew there was a possibility of its never being made. One took many chances in the frozen North.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLIZZARD

SIX weeks had passed since Gerald broke his compass. With head lowered against the driving snow, he plodded slowly across the plain behind a team of exhausted dogs. A Hudson Bay half-breed lashed the animals, for the sledge was running heavily, and, with the provisions all consumed, the party must reach shelter before night. There was no wood in the empty waste, the men were savage with hunger, and a merciless wind drove the snow into their faces. Though scarcely able to drag himself along, Gerald pushed the back of the sledge, and the two packers followed, each carrying a heavy bundle of skins to ease the load upon the dogs. The white men had tried to persuade their guide to make a cache of his freight, but he had refused. He had served the Hudson Bay from his youth in the grim desolation of the North, and he proudly stated that he had never lost a skin. Gerald, finding argument useless, would have tried a bribe, only, unfortunately, he had nothing to offer.

He had reached the factory scarcely able to walk from snowshoe lameness; and one of the packers had a frozen foot. The Scottish agent, who was short of stores, had not welcomed them effusively. It was, however, impossible to turn them away; he promised them shelter, but he declined to supply them with pro-

visions to continue their journey. They might stay, he said, though they must put up with meager fare, and when fresh stores arrived from the railroad he would see what could be done.

The delay suited Gerald; he limped contentedly about the rude log-house for some time; but when he and the packer recovered, they found that they were expected to take part in the work of the post. When the weather permitted, Gerald was despatched long distances with a half-breed to collect skins from the Indian trappers; and when snow-laden gales screamed about the log-house and it might have been fatal to venture out of sight of it, he was employed in hauling cordwood from the clearing.

At last some dog-teams arrived with stores, and the agent, seizing the opportunity of sending out a load of furs, gave his guests just food enough to carry them to the settlements and let them go with a half-breed. The journey proved arduous, for during most of it they struggled through tangled forest filled with fallen pines, and when at length they reached the plains an icy wind met them in the teeth. Now, however, they were near the end, and Gerald, stumbling along, pinched with the bitter cold, speculated dully about the news awaiting him.

His creditors could have done nothing until they learned what had become of him. That was something gained; and there was a probability of his being able to pay them off. The shares he owned were going up; there would be developments when the new shaft tapped the main body of the ore. The tip he had got from a safe quarter when he made the purchase was to be trusted after all. Mining companies were

not run solely for the benefit of outside investors, and the directors were no doubt waiting for an opportune moment for taking the public into their confidence about their long-delayed success. The last newspaper Gerald had read, however, indicated that some information had leaked out, and he hoped that an announcement which would send up the price had been made while he was in the wilds.

The lashing snow gained in fury. When Gerald looked up, the dogs were half hidden in the cloud of swirling, tossing flakes. Beyond them lay a narrow strip of livid white, dead level, unbroken by bush or tuft of grass. There was, however, no boundary to this contracted space, for it extended before them as they went on, as it had done without a change since the march began at dawn. Gerald felt that he was making no progress and was with pain and difficulty merely holding his ground. The half-breed struggled forward beside the dogs, white from head to foot, but Gerald could not see the packers, and felt incapable of looking for them. Snow filled his eyes and lashed his numbed cheeks, his lips were bleeding, and his hands and his feet felt wooden with the icy cold. Lowering his head against the blast, he stumbled on, pushing the back of the sledge and seeking refuge from bodily suffering in confused thought.

After all, he had no hope of getting free from debt. The most he could expect was to pay off the men who pressed him hardest; but that would be enough for a time. Gerald could not face a crisis boldly; he preferred to put off the evil day, trusting vaguely in his luck. Looking back, he saw that he might have escaped had he practised some self-denial and told the

truth to his father and his friends. Instead, he had made light of his embarrassments and borrowed from one man to pay another; to make things worse, he had gambled and speculated with part of the borrowed sums in the hope that success would enable him to meet his obligations. Money had to be found, but Gerald would not realize that for the man who does not possess it, the only safe plan is to work. Sometimes he won, but more often he lost; and the Winnipeg mortgage broker watched his futile struggles, knowing that they would only lead him into worse difficulties.

Then Gerald began to wonder whether the half-breed, who had nothing to guide him, could find the settlement. It seemed impossible that he could steer a straight course across the trackless waste when he could see scarcely fifty yards ahead. They might have wandered far off their line, though, so far as one could judge, the savage wind had blown steadily in front. It was a question of vital importance; but Gerald was growing indifferent. His brain got numb, and his body was losing even the sense of pain. The only thing he realized plainly was that he could not keep on his feet much longer.

At last, when it was getting dark, there was a cry from the half-breed, and one of the packers stumbled past. He shouted exultantly, the dogs swerved off their course, and Gerald felt the sledge move faster. The snow got firm beneath his feet and he knew they had struck a trail. It must lead to the settlement, which could not be far ahead. Half an hour later, a faint yellow glow appeared, the worn-out dogs broke into a run, dim squares of houses loomed out of the

snow, and lights blinked here and there. They were obviously moving up a street, and when they stopped where a blaze of light fell upon them Gerald leaned drunkenly upon the sledge. The journey was over, but he was scarcely capable of the effort that would take him out of the deadly cold.

He saw the half-breed unharnessing the dogs, and, pulling himself together, he struggled up a few steps, crossed a veranda with wooden pillars, and stumbled into a glaring room. It was filled with tobacco smoke and the smell of hot iron, and its rank atmosphere was almost unbreathable. Gerald began to choke, and his head swam as he made his way to the nearest chair. The place, as he vaguely realized, was a hotel, and the packers had already entered because he heard their voices though he could not see them. There was a stove in the middle of the room, and a group of men stood about it asking questions. Some one spoke to him, but he did not understand what the fellow said. Reeling across the room, he grasped the chair and fell into it heavily.

Exhausted as he was, it was some time before he recovered from the shock caused by the change of temperature. Some one helped him to throw off his furs, which were getting wet, and to free him of his big snowshoes. His sensations were acutely painful, but his head was getting clear, and, after a while, he followed a man into a colder room where food was set before him. He ate greedily; and feeling better afterward he went back to the other room and asked for a newspaper.

He turned to the financial reports; but he could not see the print well, for he was still somewhat dizzy

and the light was trying. The figures danced before him in a blur, and when he found his shares mentioned it cost him some trouble to make out the price. Then he let the paper drop, and sat still for some minutes with a sense of confused indignation. The shares had gone up, but only a few points. The rogues in the ring were keeping information back until weak holders were forced to sell. It was a swindle on the public and, what was more, it meant ruin to him. The shares would be taken from him before they rose, because he could not hope to hide his return from his creditors.

The safe arrival of his party would soon be reported in the newspapers; and to disappear again would result in his being regarded as a defaulter and a statement of his debts being sent to the Grange. He had borne all the hardship and danger for nothing! He was no nearer escaping from his troubles than he had been when he broke his compass in the wilds.

There was, however, one hope left. He must see Davies in Winnipeg. The fellow was clever, and might think of something, particularly as it was to his interest to keep Gerald on his feet. He thought he could count on Davies' support until the loan on mortgage fell due. His thoughts carried him no farther. He was dazed by fatigue and the shock of disappointment.

After vacantly smoking for a while, Gerald went off to bed. His room was singularly comfortless, but a hot iron pipe ran through it and it struck him as luxurious by contrast with the camps in the snowy waste. Ten minutes after he lay down he was sound asleep.

The snow had stopped the next morning, and reaching the railroad after a long and very cold drive, he arrived in Winnipeg the following day and went straight to Davies' office.

The broker looked up with a curious expression as Gerald came in.

"This is a surprise," he said. "We thought you were lost in the timber belt."

"It ought to be a relief," Gerald answered, sitting down.

Davies looked amused.

"Oh, so far as my business interests go, it doesn't make much difference. I have good security for what you owe me."

"But I suspect you're not quite ready to prove your claim to my farm."

For a few moments Davies studied Gerald's face. He wondered how much he knew about his plans concerning Allenwood, and, what was more important, whether he might try to thwart them. Young Mowbray was not a fool, and these people from the Old Country had a strong sense of caste; they stood by one another and were capable of making some sacrifice to protect their common interests against an outsider. If Mowbray had such feelings, he would need careful handling; but Davies was more inclined to think him a degenerate who placed his own safety before any other consideration.

"I don't want to prove it yet. It will be time enough when the mortgage falls due. But what has this to do with things?"

"The trouble is that you may not be able to wait," said Gerald coolly. "If you will read this letter, you

will understand, though I'm not sure it will be a surprise to you."

He gave Davies the letter demanding payment of his debt, and the broker saw that he was shrewder than he thought. As a matter of fact, Davies had been in communication with the other creditors.

"Well," he remarked, "you certainly seem to be awkwardly fixed."

"I am; but I suspect the situation's as awkward for you. This leads me to think you'll see the necessity for helping me out of the hole. If these fellows come down on me, their first move will be to try to seize my land, and you'll have to produce your mortgage. This will make trouble at Allenwood."

Davies pondered. Though he had long been scheming for a hold on Allenwood, his position was not very strong yet. He had spent a good deal of money over his plans and, although he was sure of getting it back, if he were forced into premature action he would fail in the object he aimed at. It might accordingly be worth while to spend a further sum. On the other hand, money was getting scarce with him. Wheat was falling, trade was slack, and land, in which he had invested his capital, was difficult to sell. Still, it was undesirable to spoil a promising scheme for the sake of avoiding a moderate risk.

"I understand your father's unable to pay the debt for you," he said.

"Yes; he'd probably disown me if he heard of it. I don't expect this to interest you, but some of his neighbors have money, and when they saw the settlement was threatened they'd raise a fund to buy you out. You might, of course, make them wait, but if

they were ready to find the cash, you'd have to give up your mortgages when they fell due."

"If these men are so rich, why don't you ask them to lend you the money?"

"Because I've bled them as much as they will stand, and they'd think the matter serious enough to hold a council about. This would have the result I've just indicated. I think you see now that you had better help me to settle my most pressing claims."

Davies regarded him with a grim smile.

"It strikes me that your talents were wasted in the army. You might have made your mark in my business if you'd gone into it before you took to betting. That's your weak spot. A gambler never makes good."

"Perhaps. But what about the loan?"

"Your name wouldn't be worth five cents on paper," said Davies dryly. "However, if you could get somebody with means to endorse it, I might be able to discount it for you. The rate would be high."

"Men who wouldn't lend me money would be shy of giving me their signature."

"That's so; but there's the chance that they might not be called upon to make good. You'll have to persuade them that things are sure to change for the better in, say, three months. Can you do so? I must have a solid man."

Gerald sat quiet for a while, with knitted brows. He had been frank with Davies because frankness would serve him best; but he understood that the fellow wanted the signature of one of the Allenwood farmers because this would strengthen his grasp on the settlement. Gerald saw ruin and disgrace ahead, but

by taking a worse risk than any he had yet run, he might put off the disaster for three months. Procrastination and a curious belief that things could not come to the very worst were his besetting weaknesses. He shrank from the consequences that might result; but he could see no other way of escape, and he looked up with a strained expression.

"All right. I will get you a name that you can take. I shall have to go to Allenwood."

Davies had been watching him keenly.

"Very well," he said. "Sign this, and look in again when you have got your friend's signature."

Three days later Gerald was back in the broker's office.

"Can you negotiate it now?" he asked nervously, producing the paper.

"Yes," said Davies. "The name's good enough. I know Harding."

After deducting a high rate of interest, he gave Gerald the money, and then locked the note away with a look of great satisfaction.

Harding's name was forged, and Davies knew it.

CHAPTER XX

A SEVERE TEST

WINTER ended suddenly, as it generally does on the plains, and rain and sunshine melted the snow from the withered grass. Then the northwest wind awoke, and rioting across the wide levels dried the spongy sod, while goose and crane and duck, beating their northward way, sailed down on tired wings to rest a while among the sloos. For a week or two, when no team could have hauled a load over the boggy trails, Harding was busy mending harness and getting ready his implements. The machines were numerous and expensive, but he had been forced to put off their adjustment because it is risky to handle cold iron in the Canadian frost. He had been unusually silent and preoccupied of late; but Hester, knowing his habits, asked no questions. When he was ready, Craig would tell her what was in his mind, and in the meantime she had matters of her own to think about. All the work that could be done went forward with regular precision, and, in spite of Harding's reserve, there was mutual confidence between the two. Hester was quietly happy, but she was conscious of some regret.

In a few more months she must leave her brother's house and transfer to another the care and thought she had given him. She knew he would miss her, and

now and then she wondered anxiously whether any other woman could understand and help him as she had done. Craig had faults and he needed indulging.

Then, too, he sometimes gave people a wrong impression. She had heard him called hard. Although in reality generous and often compassionate, his clear understanding of practical things made him impatient of incompetence and stupidity. He needed a wider outlook and more toleration for people who could not see what was luminously plain to him. Life was not such a simple matter with clean-cut rules and duties as Craig supposed. Grasping its main issues firmly, he did not perceive that they merged into one another through a fine gradation of varying tones and shades.

Rather late one night Hester sat sewing while Harding was busy at his writing table, his pipe, which had gone out, lying upon the papers. He had left the homestead before it was light that morning to set his steam-plow to work, though nobody at Allenwood had taken a team from the stable yet. Devine had told her of the trouble they had encountered: how the soft soil clogged the moldboards, and the wheels sank, and the coulters crashed against patches of unthawed ground. This, however, had not stopped Harding. There was work to be done and he must get about it in the best way he could. At supper time he came home in very greasy overalls, looking tired, but as soon as the meal was finished he took out some papers, and now, at last, he laid down his pen and sat with knitted brows and clenched hand.

"Come back, Craig!" Hester called softly.

He started, threw the papers into a drawer, and looked at his watch.

"I thought I'd give them half an hour, and I've been all evening," he said, feeling for his pipe. "Now we'll have a talk. I told Fred to order all the dressed lumber he wanted, and I'd meet the bill. The house he thought of putting up wasn't half big enough; in a year or two he'd have had to build again. Then we want the stuff to season, and there's no time to lose if it's to be ready for you when the harvest's in."

Hester blushed prettily.

"You have given us a good deal already, Craig. We would have been satisfied with the smaller homestead."

"Shucks!" returned Harding. "I don't give what I can't afford. You and Fred have helped to put me where I am, and I'd have felt mean if I hadn't given you a good start off when I'm going to spend money recklessly on another plan. Now that all I need for the summer's paid for, I've been doing some figuring."

"Ah! You think of buying some of the Allenwood land?"

"Yes," he said gravely. "It will be a strain, but now's the time, when the falling markets will scare off buyers. I hate to see things go to pieces, and they want a man to show them how the settlement should be run. They have to choose between me and the mortgage broker. It will cost me a tough fight to beat him, but I think I see my way."

"But what about Colonel Mowbray?"

"He's the trouble. I surely don't know what to do with him; but I guess he'll have to be satisfied with moral authority. I might leave him that."

Hester felt sorry for the Colonel. He was autocratic and arbitrary, his ways were obsolete, and he

had no place in a land that was beginning to throb with modern activity. She saw the pathetic side of his position; and, after all, the man was of a finer type than the feverish money makers. His ideals were high, though his way of realizing them was out of date.

"Craig," she said, "it may be better for Allenwood that you should take control, but you're running a big risk, and somehow your plan looks rather pitiless. You're not really hard ——"

She paused and Harding smiled.

"I'm as I was made, and to watch Allenwood going to ruin is more than I can stand for. It would be worse to let the moneylender sell it out to small farmers under a new mortgage and grind them down until they and the land were starved. Broadwood and one or two more will help me all they can, but they haven't the money or the grip to run the place alone."

"And you feel that you can do it. Well, perhaps you can, but it sounds rash. You are very sure of yourself, Craig."

"How can I explain?" he said with a half amused, half puzzled air. "The feeling's not vanity. I have a conviction that this is my job, and now that I begin to see my way, I have to put it through. I'm not swaggering about my abilities—there are smarter men in many ways at Allenwood; my strong point is this: I can see how things are going, and feel the drift of forces I didn't set in motion and can't control. All I do is to fall into line and let them carry me forward, instead of standing against the stream. The world demands a higher standard of economical efficiency; in

using the best tools and the latest methods I'm obeying the call.

"What was it that first fixed your thoughts on Allenwood?" she asked.

"Beatrice Mowbray. I'm going to marry her if I make good."

"You have no doubts about that either?"

"Oh, yes; I have plenty. I know what I'm up against; but human nature's strongest in the end. She likes me as a man."

Hester understood him. She was to marry a man of her own station, which would save her many perplexities, but Craig, respecting no standard but personal merit, would have married above or beneath him with equal boldness. It was not because he was ambitious, but because he loved her that he had chosen Beatrice Mowbray. Yet Hester was anxious on his account.

"It's a big risk," she said. "The girl is dainty and fastidious. There's nothing coarse in you, but you have no outward polish. Perhaps the tastes you have inherited may make things easier."

"Well, sometimes I have a curious feeling about these Allenwood people. I seem to understand them; I find myself talking as they do. There was something Kenwyne said the other night about an English custom, and I seemed to know all about it, though I'd never heard of the thing before."

He got up and knocked out his pipe.

"All that doesn't matter," he said whimsically. "What's important now is that it's late, and I must have steam up on the plow by daybreak."

For the next week Harding was very busy; and then, coming back to the house one afternoon for some engine-packing, he found Beatrice alone in their plain living-room. She noticed the quick gleam of pleasure in his eyes and was conscious of a response to it, but she was very calm as she explained that Hester had gone to saddle a horse on which she meant to ride with her to Mrs. Broadwood's.

"That should give us ten minutes," Harding said. "There's something I once promised to show you and I may not have a better chance."

Unlocking a drawer, he took out a small rosewood box, finely inlaid.

"This was my father's. Hester has never seen it. I found it among his things."

"It is beautiful."

Harding opened the box and handed her a photograph.

"That is my mother," he said.

Beatrice studied it with interest. The face was of peasant type, with irregular features and a worn look. Beatrice thought the woman could not have been beautiful and must have led a laborious life, but she was struck by the strength and patience the face expressed.

Harding next took out a small Prayer-book in a finely tooled binding of faded leather and gave it to her open. The first leaf bore a date and a line of writing in delicate slanted letters: *To Basil, from his mother.*

"My father's name was Basil," Harding explained, and taking up another photograph he placed it with its

back beside the inscription in the book. It was autographed: *Janet Harding.*

"I imagine it was sent to him with the book, perhaps when he was at school," Harding resumed. "You will note that the hand is the same."

This was obvious. The writing had a distinctive character, and Beatrice examined the faded portrait carefully. It was full length, and showed a lady in old-fashioned dress with an unmistakable stamp of dignity and elegance. The face had grown very faint, but on holding it to the light she thought she could perceive an elusive likeness to Hester Harding.

"This lady must have been your grandmother," she remarked.

"Yes," said Harding. "I have another picture which seems to make the chain complete."

He took it from the box and beckoned Beatrice to the window before he gave it to her, for the photograph was very indistinct. Still, the front of an English country house built in the Georgian style could be made out, with a few figures on the broad steps to the terrace. In the center stood the lady whose portrait Beatrice had seen, though she was recognizable rather by her figure and fine carriage than her features. She had her hand upon the shoulder of a boy in Eton dress.

"That," said Harding, "was my father."

Beatrice signified by a movement of her head that she had heard, for she was strongly interested in the back-ground of the picture. The wide lawn with its conventionally cut border of shrubbery stretched beyond the old-fashioned house until it ended at the edge

of a lake, across which rounded masses of trees rolled up the side of a hill. All this was familiar; it reminded her of summer afternoons in England two or three years ago. Surely she had walked along that terrace then! She could remember the gleaming water, the solid, dark contour of the beechwood on the hill, and the calm beauty of the sunlit landscape that she glimpsed between massive scattered oaks. Then she started as she distinguished the tower of a church in the faded distance, its spires rising among the tall beech-trees.

"But this is certainly Ash Garth!" she cried.

"I never heard its name," Harding answered quietly.

Beatrice sat down with the photograph in her hand. Her curiosity was strongly roused, and she had a half disturbing sense of satisfaction.

"It looks as if your father had lived there," she said.

"Yes; I think it must have been his home."

"But the owner of Ash Garth is Basil Morel! It is a beautiful place. You come down from the bleak moorland into a valley through which a river winds, and the house stands among the beechwoods at the foot of the hill."

"The picture shows something of the kind," agreed Harding, watching her with a reserved smile.

Beatrice hesitated.

"Perhaps I could find out what became of your father's people and where they are now."

"I don't want to know. I have shown you these things in confidence; I'd rather not have them talked about."

"But you must see what they might mean to you!" Beatrice exclaimed in surprise.

He moved from the window and stood facing her with an air of pride.

"They mean nothing at all to me. My father was obviously an exile, disowned by his English relatives. If he had done anything to deserve this, I don't want to learn it, but I can't think that's so. It was more likely a family quarrel. Anyway, I'm quite content to leave my relatives alone. Besides, I promised something of the kind."

He told her about the money he had received, and she listened with keen interest.

"But did he never tell you anything about his English life?"

"No," said Harding. "I'm not sure that my mother knew, though Hester thinks she meant to tell us something in her last illness. My father was a reserved man. I think he felt his banishment and it took the heart out of him. He was not a good farmer, not the stuff the pioneers are made of, and I believe he only worked his land for my mother's sake, while it was she who really managed things until I grew up. She was a brave, determined woman, and kept him on his feet."

Beatrice was silent for a few moments. The man loved her, and although she would not admit that she loved him, it was satisfactory to feel that he really belonged to her own rank. This explained several traits of his that had puzzled her. It was, however, unfortunate that he held such decided views, and she felt impelled to combat them.

"But you need ask nothing from the people except that they should acknowledge you," she urged. "Think of the difference this would make to you and Hester. It would give you standing and position."

"Hester is going to marry a man who loves her for herself, and the only position I value I have made. What would I gain by raking up a painful story? The only relatives I'm proud to claim are my mother's in Michigan, and they're plain, rugged folks."

There was something in his attitude that appealed to Beatrice. He had no false ambitions; he was content to be judged on his own merits — a severe test. For all that, she set some value upon good birth, and it was distasteful to see that he denied the advantages of his descent. Then she grew embarrassed as she recognized that what really troubled her was his indifference to the opinion of her relatives. He must know that he had a means of disarming her father's keenest prejudice, but he would not use it.

"I understand that Hester knows nothing about these portraits," she said.

"No; I've never mentioned them. It could do no good."

"Then why have you told me?"

"Well," he answered gravely, "I thought you ought to know."

"I have no claim upon the secrets you keep from your sister."

Harding was silent, and Beatrice felt annoyed. After all, she understood why he had told her and she recognized that he had acted honestly in doing so. Still, if he really loved her, she felt, he should not

let pride stand in the way of removing every obstacle to get her.

Hester came in and announced that the horses were ready; and soon afterward she and Beatrice were riding together across the prairie while Harding went doggedly back to his work.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DAY OF RECKONING

AS the spring advanced, business men in Winnipeg and the new western towns began to feel an increasing financial pressure. Money was tight, and the price of wheat, upon which the prosperity of the country depended, steadily fell. It was the beginning of a sharp set-back, a characteristic feature of the sanguine West, during which all overdrafts on the natural resources of the prairie must be met. The resources are large, but their development is slow, depending, as it does, upon the patient labor of the men who drive the plow, while those who live upon the farmer are eager to get rich.

The tide of industrial progress is often irregular. There are pauses of varying length, and sometimes recoils, when reckless traders find their ventures stranded and in danger of being wrecked before the next impulse of the flood can float them on. They borrow and buy too freely; trafficking produce not yet grown; building stores and offices in excess of the country's needs. A time comes when this is apparent, speculation ceases, credit fails, and the new cities must wait until expanding agriculture overtakes them. In the meanwhile, the fulfilment of obligations is demanded and, as often happens, cannot be made.

Davies suffered among the rest. He had foreseen a set-back, but it proved more severe than he expected.

He had bought land he could not sell, had cooperated in erecting buildings which stood empty, and had made loans to men unable to repay them.

One morning he sat in his office, gloomily reading a newspaper which made a bold attempt to deal optimistically with the depressing situation. Among other news there was a report of a meeting of the shareholders in a mining company; and this Davies studied with interest. It was what is termed an extraordinary meeting, called to consider the course to be adopted in consequence of the engineer's failing to reach the ore after sinking a costly shaft; and Davies, glancing at another column, noted that the shares had sharply fallen. Gerald Mowbray had speculated in this stock, and Davies was then expecting a call from him.

Instead of Mowbray, Carlyon came in. The boy looked anxious, but he was calm.

"I suppose you know what I've come about," he began.

"Yes; you're behind with your interest."

Carlyon's ease of manner was perhaps overdone, but he hid his feelings pluckily.

"Then, as I can't pay, what are you going to do? I must know now; when you're farming, you have to look ahead."

"I'm going to sell you up when the mortgage falls in. You have some time yet."

"Can't you renew the loan upon any terms?"

"No," said Davies truthfully. "I would if I could. I have to meet my engagements and money's scarce."

Carlyon got up, turning an unlighted cigar in nervous fingers, but there was a smile in his eyes that showed he could face ruin with dignity.

"Then, if that's your last word, I needn't waste your time; and it wouldn't be fair to blame you for my foolishness. I dare say I can find a job as teamster; it seems the only thing that's left."

"You have grit. I'm sorry I can't keep you on your feet," Davies answered with more feeling than Carlyon had expected.

"Thanks. Mowbray's waiting outside; I'll send him in."

Davies looked up when the door opened a few moments later. Gerald's careless manner had gone; he showed obvious signs of strain. Indeed, there was something in his face that hinted at desperation. Davies was not surprised at this. After a curt greeting he took up the newspaper.

"I expect you have seen the report of the company's meeting."

"I have," said Gerald. "It doesn't leave much to the imagination. At last, the directors have treated us with brutal frankness. I've filled up my proxy in favor of appointing a committee to investigate."

"It can't do much good. The fellows can investigate until they're tired, but they can't find ore that does not exist."

"It would be some comfort if they found out anything that would put the rogues who deluded us into jail," Gerald answered savagely.

Davies smiled in a meaning way.

"Rather too drastic a proceeding." He gave the other a direct glance. "People who play a crooked game shouldn't appeal to the law."

The blood crept into Gerald's face and he wondered with dire misgivings what the man meant and how

much he knew. He had counted on a report from the mining engineer that would send up the value of his shares, and had rested on this his last hope of escaping from a serious danger. Instead, he had learned that the mine was barren. It was a crushing blow, for he must find a large sum of money at once. The consequences would be disastrous if he failed.

"Well," he said, "the most important point is that my shares are worth next to nothing, and I've very little expectation of their ever going up. I don't suppose you'd take them as security for a loan at a quarter of their face value?"

"I would not," Davies answered firmly.

"Very well. My note falls due in a few days. What are you going to do?"

"Present it for payment."

Gerald looked at him keenly, to see if he meant it; but he could read in the broker's imperturbable face nothing to lead him to doubt this. He tried to pull himself together, and failed. Gerald had not inherited the stern, moral courage of the Mowbray stock.

"You can't afford to let me drop," he pleaded in a hoarse voice. "As soon as you take away your support the brutes I've borrowed from will come down on me like wolves, and, to protect your interests, you'll have to enforce your mortgage rights. I needn't point out that this will spoil your plans. You're not ready to make your grab at Allenwood yet."

Davies heard him unmoved. He was comparing his attitude with that of the ruined lad he had just dismissed. Carlyon was, of course, a fool who deserved his fate, but his pluck had roused the moneylender's sympathy. He did not mean to let it make

him merciful, but he had some human feeling, and it inspired him with contempt for Mowbray. The fellow was clever enough to see that Davies' plans were directed against his relatives and friends, but this had not prevented his falling in with them for the sake of a temporary advantage. His pride was a sham; he forgot it when it threatened to cost him something. Moreover he had not been straight with Davies in several ways. He had a rogue's heart, but was without the rogue's usual nerve.

"I often have to change my plans," Davies said calmly. "Just now I'm short of money, and must get some in. Anyway, there's no secret about the mortgage; it had to be registered."

"Of course; but I don't suppose anybody knows about it, for all that. People don't spend their time turning up these records."

"It would be a wise precaution, when they dealt with you," Davies answered pointedly.

Gerald did not resent the taunt.

"But you can't get your money for the note," he urged. "It's impossible for me to meet it now."

"Or later, I guess. Well, I'll have to fall back on the endorser; he's a solid man."

A look of terror sprang into Gerald's face.

"You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Well," Gerald faltered, "he never expected he'd have to pay the note."

"That's his affair. He ought to have known you better."

Gerald roused himself for a last effort.

"Renew it on any terms you like; I'll agree to what-

ever you demand. I have some influence at Allenwood, and can get you other customers. You'll find it worth while to have my help."

Davies smiled scornfully.

"You can't be trusted. You'd sell your friends, and that means you'd sell me if you thought it would pay. I'm willing to take a risk when I back a sport; but one can't call you that. You have had your run and lost, and now you must put up the stakes." He took a pen from the rack and opened a book. "There doesn't seem to be anything more to be said. Good-morning."

Gerald left, with despair in his heart; and when he had gone Davies took the note from his safe and examined the signature on the back with a thoughtful air. After all, though money was tight, he might retain his hold on Allenwood if he played his cards cleverly.

During the afternoon Carlyon and Gerald took the westbound train, and the next evening Gerald reached the Grange. There had been a hard rain all day, and he was wet after the long drive, but he went straight to the study where his father was occupied. It was not dark outside yet, but the room was shadowy and heavy rain beat against its walls. Mowbray sat at a table by the window, apparently lost in thought, for although there were some papers in front of him the light was too dim to read. He glanced up with a frown when his son came in.

"If you had thought it worth while to let me know you were going to Winnipeg, I could have given you an errand," he said, and added dryly: "One would imagine that these trips are beyond your means."

Gerald was conscious of some shame and of pity for his father, whom he must humble; but his fears for his own safety outweighed everything else.

"I want you to listen, sir. There's something you must know."

"Very well," said Mowbray. "It is not good news; your voice tells me that."

It was a desperately hard confession, and Mowbray sat strangely still, a rigid, shadowy figure against the fading window, until the story was finished. Then he turned to his son, who had drawn back as far as possible into the gloom.

"You cur!" There was intense bitterness in his tone. "I can't trust myself to speak of what I feel. And I know, to my sorrow, how little it would affect you. But, having done this thing, why do you slink home to bring disgrace on your mother and sister? Could you not hide your shame across the frontier?"

It was a relief to Gerald that he could, at least, answer this.

"If you will think for a moment, sir, you will see the reason. I don't want to hide here, but it's plain that, for all our sakes, I must meet this note. If it's dishonored, the holder will come to you; and, although I might escape to the boundary, you would be forced to find the money." Gerald hesitated before he added: "It would be the only way to save the family honor."

"Stop!" cried Mowbray. "Our honor is a subject you have lost all right to speak about!"

For a moment or two he struggled to preserve his self-control, and then went on in a stern, cold voice:

"Still, there is some reason in what you urge. It shows the selfish cunning that has been your ruin."

"Let me finish, sir," Gerald begged hoarsely. "The note must be met. If I take it up on presentation, the matter ends there; but you can see the consequences if it's dishonored."

"They include your arrest and imprisonment. It's unthinkable that your mother and sister should be branded with this taint!" Mowbray clenched his hand. "The trouble is that I cannot find the money. You have already brought me to ruin."

There was silence for the next minute, and the lashing of the rain on the ship-lap boards sounded harshly distinct.

Gerald saw a possible way of escape, but, desperate as he was, he hesitated about taking it. It meant sacrificing his sister; but the way seemed safe. His father would stick at nothing that might save the family honor.

"There's Brand," he suggested, knowing it was the meanest thing he had ever done. "Of course, one would rather not tell an outsider; but he can keep a secret and might help."

"Ah!" Mowbray exclaimed sharply, as if he saw a ray of hope. Then he paused and asked with harsh abruptness: "Whose name did you use on the note?"

"Harding's."

Mowbray lost his self-control. Half rising in his chair, he glared at his son.

"It's the last straw!" he said, striking the table furiously. "How the low-bred fellow will triumph over us!"

"He can't," Gerald pointed out cunningly, using his strongest argument in an appeal to his father's

prejudice. "He will know nothing about the note if I can take it up when due."

Mowbray sank back in his chair, crushed with shame.

"It must be managed somehow," he said in a faltering voice. "Now — go; and, for both of our sakes, keep out of my way."

Gerald left him without a word, and Mowbray sat alone in the darkness, feeling old and broken as he grappled with the bitterest grief he had known. There had, of course, been one or two of the Mowbrays who had led wild and reckless lives, but Gerald was the first to bring actual disgrace upon the respected name. The Colonel could have borne his extravagance and forgiven a certain amount of dissipation, but it humbled him to the dust to realize that his son was a thief and a coward.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PRICE OF HONOR

IT was very quiet in the drawing-room of the Grange, where Mrs. Mowbray sat with an exhausted look, as if she had made an effort that had cost her much. She had just finished speaking, and was watching Beatrice, whose face was white and strained.

"But what has Gerald done? I think I have a right to know," the girl broke out.

"He wrote somebody else's name on the back of a promise to pay some money, which meant that the other man, who really knew nothing about it, guaranteed that the payment would be made."

"But that is forgery!" Beatrice cried, aghast.

"Yes," said Mrs. Mowbray with a shudder; "I'm afraid it's forgery of a very serious kind, because it enabled him to obtain a good deal of money which he could not otherwise have got."

"Oh, how dreadful!" Beatrice impulsively crossed the floor and, kneeling down beside her mother, put her arm round her. "I know how you must feel it. And now I can understand Father's troubled look. He has been very quiet and stern since Gerald came home."

"Your father has more trouble than you know. Perhaps I'd better tell you about it, as you must grasp the situation. You heard that Godfrey Barnett

was dead, but you don't know that he died ruined by the failure of the bank."

"Ah! All our money was in Barnett's, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Mowbray. "It has all gone."

She stopped in distress. The task of influencing the girl to take a course she must shrink from was painful to her; but she had promised her husband and must go on with it. There was no other way, and it was in accordance with her traditions that the threatened honor of the family should come before her daughter's inclinations.

"Now you can see why it's impossible for your father to save Gerald by paying the money. It explains why he has been forced to ask help from Brand."

Beatrice drew back from her, as if overwhelmed.

"Blow after blow! How has he borne it all? And yet he is very brave."

"You are his daughter," said Mrs. Mowbray meaningly, though she felt that what she was doing was cruel. "You must be brave, too. I think you see how you can make things easier for him."

"Oh!" The girl drew a quick breath. Then she rose with a hot face, burning with fierce rebellion. "The fault is Gerald's, and he must suffer for it! Why should I! He has always brought us trouble; everything has been given up for the sake of the boys. Don't I know how you have had to deny yourself because of their extravagance? It's unjust! Not even my father has the right to ask this sacrifice from me!"

"Gerald cannot suffer alone. If he is arrested for forgery, it will crush your father and be a stain on Lance's name as long as he lives. Lance has been

very steady since his accident, and I dare not think of his being thrown back into his reckless ways. Then the disgrace will reflect even more seriously on you — a girl is condemned for the sins of her relatives. I do not speak of myself, because the worst that could happen to me was to learn that my son had done this thing."

Beatrice's mood changed suddenly. Her high color faded and she made a hopeless gesture.

"It's true! I feel as if I were in a trap and could not get out. It's horrible!"

She sank down again by her mother's side and struggled for composure.

"Let us face the matter quietly," she said. "Brand is our friend; he cannot be so ungenerous as to ask a price for his help."

"He is a hard man, and very determined."

"Yes; I know. I have been afraid of him. He made me feel he was waiting until his opportunity came. But, for all that, I can't believe ——"

Mrs. Mowbray gave her a glance of compassionate sympathy.

"Even if Brand does not claim his reward, we know what would persuade him to do us the great service your father must ask. Can we take this favor from him, and then deny him what he longs for? There is nobody else who can help us, and our need is pressing."

"But I am not asking the favor!" Beatrice urged in desperation. "The debt is not mine! It would be different if I were in Gerald's place."

"You must see that you are using a false argument," Mrs. Mowbray answered gently. "A girl can-

not separate herself in this way from her father and brother: the family responsibilities are hers. It may sound very harsh, but you cannot repudiate the liability Gerald has incurred. When he did wrong, he made us all accountable."

Beatrice could not deny this. She had been taught that the family was not a group but a unit and its honor indivisible, and she had always been made to feel that it was her duty to reflect credit upon her name. It was a comfortable doctrine when things went well; when things went wrong, however, it became very cruel. Seeing no hope at all, she fell into mute despair, and it was some time before she could rouse herself. At last she got up with a quietly resolute expression.

"Well," she said slowly, as if it cost her a great effort, "I must try not to disgrace you by any foolish weakness. Since this is our debt, I must pay it. One understands that women have often done such things. It seems as if all the burdens were laid on our shoulders — and men call us weak!" She paused a moment, and then asked in a dead, indifferent voice: "Whose name did Gerald forge?"

"I don't know. Your father didn't tell me. I thought he tried to avoid it."

Moving calmly to the door, Beatrice was surprised to find Gerald waiting in the passage outside. She gave him a steady look. Her face was white and hard, and there was scorn in her eyes. Gerald drew back, almost as if she had struck him.

"You have been talking to Mother?" he asked awkwardly.

"Yes," she said; "and you know what we talked

about. So far as anything I can do may count, you are safe. That, of course, was all you wanted to know."

She saw keen relief in his face.

"After all," he urged, "Brand is a very good fellow and has many advantages to offer."

She turned upon him with burning indignation.

"Don't be a hypocrite! You know it would not have mattered if he had been the meanest rogue in Canada — so long as you got free."

She swept past him and left him standing in the passage with a downcast air.

Seeking refuge in her room, she locked the door and tried to think. She must face the situation and not let futile anger and horror overcome her. Growing calm after a time, she began to wonder why the prospect of marrying Brand was so repugnant. He belonged to her own station, they had much in common, and, in a way, she liked him. Then, she had long known that she would be expected to make a good match, and Brand had kept his beautiful English house waiting for her; his wife would have the position and social influence Beatrice had been taught to value. But these things seemed worthless now.

She looked out through the open window at the prairie. It had grown green with the rain, though clumps of bleached grass still checkered it with silvery gray. Red lilies were opening here and there, and as she gazed the blue shadow of a cloud swept across the plain and vanished, leaving it bright with sunshine. Its vastness and the sense of freedom it conveyed appealed to the girl. There was a charm in the wide horizon; one never felt cramped upon the plains. She

loved the spacious land, and did not want to live in England.

But this was a deceptive argument. Brand would stay at Allenwood if she wished. Indeed, she knew that he would make many a sacrifice to please her if she married him. She must look for a better reason.

It was not hard to find, for in this crisis she must be honest with herself. The blood crept to her face as she realized that she could not marry Brand because she loved some one else. Now that such love was hopeless and must be overcome, the disturbing truth was plain. She had fenced with and tried to deny it, but when it was too late, it had beaten her.

By way of relief, she tried to occupy her mind with another thought. Her father had been reluctant to tell whose name Gerald had forged. Beatrice knew that her brother would choose a man of wealth, otherwise the name would have no weight, and she did not think he had fixed on Brand. Her father's reticence made her feel that it must be Harding. Beatrice thought her father unjust and foolish. Harding would not take a shabby advantage of his position; he was generous, but, unfortunately, no help could come from him. She could not tell her lover that her brother was a thief; besides, this was a secret that must be carefully hidden from everybody outside the family. Brand, she reflected with a shudder of repugnance, would soon belong to it. There was no help anywhere.

Beatrice leaned against the window-frame, her head buried in her arms. The soft air from the prairie swept over her caressingly, the hot sunshine bathed her; but her heart was black with despondency. She

was in a trap — a trap set by her own brother — and no escape was possible.

She threw her head up with a sudden resolve. At least she would make the sacrifice bravely, without murmur, as befitted the daughter of the house of Mowbray.

Her mood changing again as quickly, she threw herself across the bed and burst into a fit of passionate sobbing.

And while she lay there, worn with crying, her father sat in his study talking to Brand. He related with candor what had happened, making no attempt to hide the ugliest facts; and Brand grasped at the opportunity opened for him. He recognized that it would give him a strong claim on Mowbray's gratitude. It might be mean to take advantage of it; but he had waited a long time for Beatrice, and might lose her altogether if he let this chance slip.

"You have my sympathy, sir," he said suavely. "It must have been a great shock; but I am glad you have taken me into your confidence, because I can be of help. You can repay me whenever you find you can do so without trouble."

Mowbray gave a sigh of great relief.

"Thank you, Brand. You cannot understand how you have eased my mind. I know of no one else who would, or could, have done so much."

The Colonel sank back in his chair, and Brand noticed how worn he looked. The younger man was conscious of a slight feeling of pity; but he could not afford to indulge it: he must strike while the iron was hot.

"Now that things are going so hard for you, in a

financial way, it would be some satisfaction to feel that your daughter's future was safe," he said.

Mowbray was silent a moment. Then he answered slowly.

"Yes. I wish indeed that she could see her way to marry you."

"I will speak plainly. I have been waiting patiently, but, so far as I can judge, I have gained nothing by this. I'm afraid I may lose all if I wait much longer. Beatrice likes me, we agree on many points, our tastes are similar, and I think there's every reason to hope she could be happy with me. I could give her all that a girl brought up as she has been could desire."

"Do you suggest that I should urge her to marry you?" Mowbray asked with some asperity.

Brand hesitated. He knew that he was doing an unchivalrous thing, but the passion he hitherto had kept in check mastered him.

"Well," he said, "I suppose that is what I really meant."

Mowbray looked at him in haughty surprise.

"You know I cannot refuse you; but I hardly expected you to take this line. It might have been better if you had relied upon my gratitude and my daughter's recognition of the service you have done us. We are not in the habit of forgetting our debts."

"The trouble is that I cannot afford to take a risk; there is some danger of Beatrice's becoming estranged from me. I would not press you if I saw any strong reason why she should not be happy as my wife, but I know of none, and I feel that this is my last chance."

"Then you mean to insist upon your claim?"

"Very reluctantly, sir."

Mowbray was silent for a moment or two, and then he looked up with a strained expression.

"You place me in a helpless position. You make me and my family your debtors, and then——" He broke off abruptly. "Did you mean to hint there was some particular danger of my daughter's becoming estranged from you?"

"Since you force me to be candid, I believe she is attracted by another man; perhaps I ought to say interested in him. I cannot suspect any attachment yet; but I am afraid."

"Who is he?"

Brand hesitated a moment before answering.

"I cannot give you his name, because I may be mistaken. Still, he is a man you would strongly disapprove of."

There was suspicion in Mowbray's eyes and his face hardened.

"What you hint at surprises me, Brand; but I cannot compliment you upon your conduct to-night. However, as Beatrice is the most interested person, it is, I think, only right that she should be allowed to speak."

He rang, and the servant who promptly answered was sent for Beatrice. When the door opened a few moments afterward, Mowbray was surprised to see not his daughter but the maid.

"Miss Mowbray is ill," she announced, "and begs you to excuse her."

The maid withdrew, and Mowbray frowned.

"When must my daughter pay this debt?" he asked.

"When is the forged note due?"

"I understand that the Winnipeg fellow will bring it to me here on Friday night."

"Then there are two days yet. I will leave Miss Mowbray free until Friday night. In the meantime I shall expect you to use your influence with her." He hesitated a moment, feeling that he might not be taking the right line. "I must urge you again, sir, to consider," he finished, "that it will be only for your daughter's good, in every way, to marry me."

When he left, Mowbray sat motionless in his chair for a long while, looking out over the prairie but seeing nothing in front of him. Then with an effort he roused himself. After all, he tried to believe, it would not be so bad for the girl. She was young; she might yet learn to love Brand, even though she married him under compulsion. As for Harding —— Mowbray dismissed the thought. He had no fear that his daughter would so far forget her station: the pride of caste had been drilled into her too strongly.

CHAPTER XXIII

A WOMAN INTERVENES

THE following afternoon Beatrice rode moodily across the plain. After another talk with her mother, she had passed a sleepless night and spent the morning wandering restlessly to and fro. It was horribly degrading to her to feel that Brand had bought her; but it was true, and it destroyed the hope that time might reconcile her to her lot. She could not forgive him that, but after all it was only part of an intolerable situation.

On a long gradual rise her horse began to slacken speed, and she pulled up when she reached the top. Sitting still for a time, she vacantly looked about. The hill commanded a wide view: she could see the prairie roll back, changing as it receded from vivid green to faint ethereal blue on the far horizon. White clouds swept across the sky, streaking the plain with shadows. There was something exhilarating in the picture, but Beatrice felt that she hated it for its mocking suggestion of space and freedom. There was no freedom at Allenwood; she was to be sold into shameful bondage.

A gray streak of smoke that moved across the waste caught her eye. It was Harding, harrowing by steam or perhaps bedding down his seed-wheat with the land-packer. Beatrice thought of him with a

poignant sense of regret. He loved her, and she had deceived herself in thinking she could not love him. She had been bound by foolish traditions and had not had the courage to break loose. It was too late now and she must pay the penalty of her cowardice. She longed to call Harding to her help; he was strong enough to save her. But the family disgrace must be kept secret. There was no way out; she seemed to be turning round and round in a narrow cage and beating herself vainly against the bars.

As she started her horse she saw in the distance the Broadwood homestead rising, a blur of gray buildings, and she rode toward it. She needed sympathy, and her mother had nothing but resignation to urge. Effie Broadwood was kind and fond of her; it would be some comfort to tell her that she was in trouble — though of course she could not go into particulars.

Mrs. Broadwood at once noticed the girl's troubled face, and knew that something had gone wrong. She led Beatrice into her plain little sitting-room and made her comfortable on a sofa. Then, sitting down beside her, she took her hand affectionately.

"Now, dear," she said, "we can have a quiet talk. I know that something is troubling you."

Beatrice was moved by her unaffected sympathy. She had friends at Allenwood but she could not go to them. They would think her rather to be envied than pitied; but this warm-hearted, unconventional woman would understand. She longed to take her into her confidence, and although this was impossible, the numbing despair in her heart began to melt.

"I can't tell you much; but — I suppose I shall be married soon."

Mrs. Broadwood looked keenly interested.

"Is it an Allenwood man?"

"Brand. I must tell him definitely to-morrow evening."

"Ah!" Mrs. Broadwood exclaimed. There was a pathetic note in the girl's voice that touched her. "But if you don't want the man you have only to let him know."

"I wish it were as easy as that!" Beatrice answered hopelessly.

Mrs. Broadwood was silent for a few moments, but her fingers clasped the small hand under them with a comforting pressure.

"I think I understand. Your father and mother are on his side; but if you'd hate to have him for a husband you must not sacrifice yourself."

"But I must!" said Beatrice desperately, and her forced calm suddenly broke down. Her companion's gentleness had destroyed it, and now a reaction from the strain she had borne had begun. "No," she added in a broken voice, "there's no way out! I've been trying to find one and I can't."

She buried her face in one of the pillows and broke into choking sobs. It was weak, she felt, and not what was to be expected from a Mowbray, but there was comfort in the bitter tears. For a while Mrs. Broadwood let her cry, but when she began to soothe her, Beatrice roused herself. She could not remember afterward what she said, but her confused excuses for her emotion and her fragmentary half confidences left a disturbing impression on Mrs. Broadwood's mind.

Beatrice rode home feeling slightly comforted,

though she was no nearer a solution of her difficulties. She had, of course, been very weak and perhaps had said more than was wise, but she had not betrayed her brother; and Effie Broadwood was a true friend. Beatrice was justified in thinking so, for Mrs. Broadwood was to prove a better friend than she suspected.

When the girl had gone, Mrs. Broadwood spent some time in thinking over what she had heard. Although she had keen intelligence, there were points that puzzled her; she had been given several clues, but they broke off before they led her far. Then she decided that something might be learned by tactfully questioning her husband, and she went about her work until he came home in the evening. She let him finish his supper and light his pipe before she began.

"The Mowbrays are in trouble just now, aren't they, Tom?"

"I dare say; they certainly have their difficulties. Why?"

"Beatrice rode over this afternoon and she had something on her mind. What do you think's the matter?"

"For one thing, the Colonel must have lost a good deal since wheat began to go down. Then I heard something about the failure of an English bank; Lance once told me the family had shares in it. I expect the stoppage made a difference in their income."

"That doesn't quite account for it. Do you know of anything else?"

"Gerald may have been giving them trouble again. I know he has borrowed a good deal of money which he'd find it difficult to pay, and I'm afraid he's been mortgaging his land."

This confirmed some of Mrs. Broadwood's suspicions; but the matter was still far from clear.

"The Colonel would be very mad about the mortgage," she said. "Still, it's Gerald's land, and he can do what he likes with it."

"Not altogether. He's bound by the settlement covenant, and, as his father gave him the land, he ought to respect his opinions. Mowbray's convinced that to let in strangers would be hurtful to Allenwood."

While feeling sure that Gerald was the cause of the Mowbrays' troubles, Mrs. Broadwood did not think that Beatrice would marry a man she did not care for in order to benefit the settlement. There must be another reason.

"Suppose Gerald had already mortgaged his farm and wanted some more money, how would he borrow it?"

"He'd find it hard, as he has no security to offer," Broadwood answered with a smile. "I don't know much about these matters, and don't want to know anything more, but I believe the usual plan is something like this: you give the lender a note, an engagement to pay in, we'll say, three months, and get somebody to endorse it. His putting down his name makes him liable for the amount, and if the lender was satisfied about him, he'd give you the money at once and take off as much interest as he could."

"But who'd guarantee Gerald in that way?"

"I don't know. I certainly would not."

"He would have to be a man who was known to have money," she persisted.

"I suppose so; it would naturally make the trans-

action easier. But it's not our business to pry into the Mowbrays' affairs."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Broadwood. "Still, I was sorry for Beatrice and it made me curious."

She changed the subject and after a time took up a book as an excuse for silence. She wanted to think, because she now felt sure that Gerald's financial difficulties accounted for the pressure that was being put upon Beatrice. The girl was being forced to marry Brand because he would supply the money to save her brother from disgrace. Mrs. Broadwood felt that it must be disgrace and not an ordinary debt. There would, however, be no great difficulty if he had given some one a note, for the man who endorsed it must have known that he might be called upon to pay. But suppose he had not heard about the transaction at all? Mrs. Broadwood dropped her book, for she saw that she had guessed the riddle. Gerald had not asked the man to guarantee him; he had forged his name. Taking this for granted made everything plain.

Then she began to wonder whose name Gerald had forged. It could not be his father's, for Mowbray was known to be far from rich. The only man with much money at Allenwood was Brand, but Mrs. Broadwood thought it could not be Brand, because she knew Mowbray's pride and believed that in spite of his anxiety to keep the matter quiet he would not force his daughter to marry a man his son had robbed. Admitting this, she must look for some one else. Then it dawned upon her that the man was Harding.

"What did you say?" Broadwood asked, looking up from his paper.

"I was thinking," his wife replied. "S'pose I must have thought aloud. Anyway it wouldn't interest you. How's wheat going?"

"Down," said Broadwood, and there was silence again.

Mrs. Broadwood saw what she could do. She admitted that she might make a deplorable mess of things if she were mistaken, but the need was serious enough to justify some risk. She had courage and she was fond of Beatrice.

The next afternoon she drove across the prairie to the spot where she thought Harding was at work. She found him busy with his engine at the end of a wide belt of plowing which the land packer had rolled down hard and smooth.

"Craig!" she called, pulling up her horse. "I want you a minute."

He came to the step of the buck-board, dressed in greasy overalls, with an oil smear on his hand, but she felt that he was to be trusted as she gave him an approving glance. She liked his level look and his steady eyes; there was force in his quiet face. He was the type of man she admired: swift in action, free from what she called meanness, and determined. Indeed, she felt inclined to hesitate as she thought of his resolute character. It would be easy to set him in motion, but once that was done he could not be stopped, and there might be startling developments. It was rather like firing the train to a mine; and there was a disturbing possibility that she might, after all, be wrong in her surmises.

But she gathered up her courage; and she knew that there was no time to be wasted.

"Craig," she said, "do you want Beatrice Mowbray?"

He started and his brown face flushed.

"I want her more than anything else in the world."

Mrs. Broadwood gave him a quick, approving nod.

"Do you know how she feels about you?"

"No. I only know what I hope."

"Well," said Mrs. Broadwood thoughtfully, "I believe she'd rather take you than Brand."

"Brand!"

"I expect she'll be engaged to him to-night, unless you act." Mrs. Broadwood checked him as he was about to speak. "This is your chance, Craig; you'll never get another half as good. Listen quietly for a few minutes."

He stood very still, without asking a question, until she had finished.

"I guess you're right," he said with set jaws; "and I know the man who holds the note. If Beatrice is to give Brand her answer to-night, it means that Davies is coming here to squeeze the Colonel, and if his train's on time, he ought to make the Grange in about three hours."

"And you'll be there to meet him?"

Harding smiled.

"When I'm wanted I like to be on hand, and I guess I'm wanted pretty badly now."

"You certainly are. I suppose you see what you must do?"

"If there's a note out with my name on it, it has got to be taken up. You can leave the thing to me. I meet my obligations."

Mrs. Broadwood saw that he had found a more ef-

fective way of dealing with the situation than had yet occurred to her.

"Craig," she exclaimed with frank admiration, "you're a wonder!"

He held out his hand with a twinkle of rather grim amusement.

"Anyway, I have to thank you for putting me on the track, and I'm not going to forget it. Now I have several matters to fix up before I start for the Grange."

She touched the horse with the whip and he stepped back.

"Good luck!" she called. "You deserve it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT TRIUMPH

IT was getting dark when Brand reached the Grange. He found Beatrice in the hall, for she had not heard his arrival in time to get away. She met him calmly, but after a word of greeting she did not speak, and he hesitated.

"Well," he said with an effort, "I have come for your answer."

"Isn't it too soon?" she asked. "You haven't carried out your part of the bargain yet."

Brand frowned in embarrassment.

"You are very bitter; but I dare say it must be hard for you to see my conduct in a favorable light."

"I'm afraid it's impossible."

Beatrice moved toward the broad stairway.

"My father is waiting for you in the library," she said.

Taking this for a dismissal, Brand joined Mowbray in his study. He was sorry that the lamp was lighted, because he felt disturbed, and the Colonel's constrained manner did not set him at ease. For all that, they forced themselves to talk about matters of no importance until Davies was shown in.

"I came to see your son, but I meant to ask for an interview with you before I left," the money-lender

said to Mowbray, and then glanced at Brand. "I imagine that our business had better ——"

"Mr. Brand is acquainted with it, and I prefer him to remain. My son has informed me that you hold a note of his. No doubt, you have brought it with you?"

"You propose to pay it for him?"

"Certainly," said Mowbray with a trace of haughtiness. "Since he was foolish enough to give you such a document it must be met."

Davies felt surprised; but he took out the paper. He had not expected it to be met, and as he stood with it in his hand, hesitating, he was strangely irritated by Mowbray's smile. Then he put the note on the table, and, after examining it, Mowbray gave it to Brand, who made a sign indicating that he was satisfied.

"Yes," he said, "it seems to be in order." Then he turned to Davies. "We'll keep this paper; I'll give you a check."

"Presently." Davies picked up the note. When he spoke, he addressed Mowbray. "I'll give you the note canceled in return for payment of half the amount; the rest to stand against a purchase I want to make."

"You can have it all. I have no wish to defer payment. And I don't understand what your purchases have to do with me."

"I'll explain. One of your young neighbors is giving up his farm. He hasn't broken much land and the buildings are small. The place ought to go cheap, and I'm open to buy it. Then there's a section of vacant land, and I'm willing to pay a small

sum for an option of taking it up at a fixed price in a year's time."

Mowbray looked at him in cold surprise.

"To begin with, I cannot sell you my neighbor's property; nor can I give you an option on the vacant lot."

"In a sense that's true, but you can fix things as I want it if you like. Your word goes a long way in these matters."

"I see no reason why I should use my influence in your favor."

"It's impossible!" Brand interposed bluntly. "We are very careful whom we let in at Allenwood."

"In short, you mean to keep me out," Davies suggested with an ugly smile.

"Take it for granted that we cannot sell you the land you want."

"Very well," said Davies. "I must try to convince you that you had better indulge me." He fingered the note. "I have not parted with this document yet. It seems to me that there's something unusual about Mr. Harding's signature."

As a rule, both Brand and Mowbray were capable of self-control, but the attack was so unexpected that they showed their alarm. It had not occurred to them that the moneylender might suspect the forgery. Indeed, there was terror in the Colonel's face before he recovered himself, and Brand's grew angrily red.

"You scoundrel! What do you mean?" he cried.

"Only that I'm not sure Mr. Harding would know his own writing if I showed it to him."

Mowbray motioned Brand to be silent, and for a few moments both sat still, feeling overwhelmed.

Brand saw that it was now out of his power to protect his companion; and the Colonel realized that the sacrifice of his daughter might prove useless. He was in the moneylender's hands, and to comply with his exactions would not end them. The honor of the Mowbrays was at the rascal's mercy.

There was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Harding!" a servant announced.

"I can't see him at present," said Mowbray with a start as he heard a quick, resolute step in the passage.

Before he finished speaking, Harding entered.

"This must look like an intrusion, and you'll have to excuse my not waiting your leave," he said. "The fact is, I was determined to get in."

"So it seems," Mowbray answered. "Since you have succeeded, may I ask if you came here by this gentleman's request?"

"Why, no!" Harding looked at Davies with a twinkle. "I guess my turning up is a surprise to him."

Davies' crestfallen air bore this out, but he waited silently, and for a moment or two neither Brand nor Mowbray spoke. The Colonel, to his astonishment, was conscious of some relief. After all, he would rather fall into Harding's hands than the moneylender's.

"Perhaps you will explain the object of your visit," Mowbray said, when the silence threatened to become awkward.

"Certainly; though it ought to be plain. Mr. Davies holds a note with my name on it, which I understand Mr. Gerald Mowbray cannot meet." He leaned forward and took the note. "It's due to-day."

Baffled rage shone in Davies' eyes.

"You admit your liability?" he cried indignantly.

"Of course! My name's here; I don't go back on my obligations."

Mowbray looked at him with dull astonishment; and Brand, whose wits were clearer, with reluctant admiration. He thought the farmer was playing his part well; but Davies would not give in yet.

"Am I to understand that you acknowledge this as your signature?" he asked in a calmer tone.

"Do you mean to tell me that you doubted it?" Harding returned. "You haven't the reputation of being a fool. Would you have lent money on a note you suspected was forged?"

Davies saw the game was up. Brand was Mowbray's friend, and Harding was an obviously hostile witness. Unless he were very careful he might lay himself open to a charge of conspiracy; and he was powerless to attack Mowbray so long as Harding acknowledged his signature.

"Well," resumed Harding, taking out his wallet, "I guess I'll keep this paper and give you a check."

Brand saw his last hope vanishing.

"Stop a minute!" he interposed. "You're taking too much for granted in concluding that Gerald cannot pay. The debt is his in the first place, and with the help of a friend he is able to find the money."

Mowbray looked up with a curious expression in which there was relief and shame. Though he would have forced his daughter into a marriage she shrank from, the necessity for doing so had preyed upon his mind and he seized the chance of freeing himself of his debt to Brand. He did not stop to reason, but

acted on the vague feeling that Harding, whom he had distrusted, would prove an easier creditor.

"Gerald cannot pay this note," he said firmly.

Brand turned to him in surprise; but he saw that Mowbray was not to be moved, and he understood what had prompted the Colonel's sudden change. Brand had not played a straight game, and he had lost. At the last moment the prairie man had beaten him. All that he could do now was to bear his defeat with dignity.

"Very well, sir," he answered, getting up. "Since I cannot be of service, I will leave you to arrange matters with these gentlemen."

Mowbray went to the door with him, and closing it behind them laid his hand on Brand's arm.

"You pressed me hard, but you were willing to help when I needed it badly. I shall remember that with gratitude."

"I wish you could forget the rest, but it's too much to hope," Brand replied; and when Mowbray went back into the room he walked moodily down the passage.

Reaching the hall, he found Beatrice waiting there. She had seen Davies come in and had heard of Harding's arrival, and she now wondered with tense anxiety what was going on. She could form no conclusion and could not ask Gerald, because he had carefully kept out of her way. Looking up at Brand's step, she felt her heart beat with returning hope, for his lips were set and his brows knit. He had rather the air of a man who had received a heavy blow than that of a rejoicing lover. Something unexpected had happened to humble him and set her free.

"Well," he said with an effort, "I have lost you. Still, I want you to believe that I loved you."

Beatrice was trembling from the shock of relief, but she knew that it would be cruel to show what she felt.

"I never doubted that," she answered quietly; "but you took the wrong way."

"There was no other available. Now that I have lost, perhaps you will forgive me. I'm going to England in a week or two; I haven't the courage to stay here."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But to go away may be best."

Brand left her, and she leaned against the big newel-post and tried to keep calm. The thing she dreaded most was not to happen. In some miraculous way she was free! She wondered with keen anxiety what her father and Harding were talking about. Davies, she knew, had left the house a few moments after Brand.

As a matter of fact, the moneylender was promptly dismissed, with a check for the full amount of the note; and when Mowbray returned after closing the door behind him, Harding laid the note on the table.

"This is yours, sir," he said with a smile. "You may destroy it."

"Mine!" Mowbray showed his surprise. "You mean — you ——" He stumbled over the words. "You admit your responsibility?" he finally ended.

"Of course!"

Harding picked up the note, tore it across twice, and threw the pieces into the open fire.

"There's an end of that," he smiled. "Since it

bore my signature I don't know that I have any claim, but you can pay me when you like. I won't press you."

Mowbray did not answer for a moment. He felt overcome and could not collect his thoughts. His prejudices against Harding were strong, but they were, in a sense, impersonal. It was not the man he objected to, but what he stood for. The fellow's generosity humbled him.

"I'm afraid I have done nothing to warrant this great kindness," he said awkwardly. "Am I to understand that you offer it to me without conditions, asking nothing in return?"

"No; not altogether. I guess I might choose a better time, but I feel that you should know what I want. I'm going to ask a favor. I suppose you no longer think of compelling Miss Mowbray to marry Brand?"

"You can take it that I do not. But what is this to you?"

"Well," Harding said with a slight unsteadiness in his voice, "I want to ask you if you will give her to me?"

Mowbray straightened himself in his chair.

"So you, too, mean to make terms, when you know I cannot refuse!"

"No," Harding answered shortly, "I make none. If you had insisted on Miss Mowbray's marrying Brand, I might have had something to say. All I ask is that you give her a free choice; if she uses it to take somebody else, I won't complain."

"That is remarkably generous," Mowbray conceded.

"We'll let that go. Perhaps my request is some-

thing of a shock, but I want you to hear me out. If things go well with me this year, I can give my wife every comfort you have at Allenwood, and she can lead the life she likes best — except that I can't leave the prairie. Then there is nothing that need separate your daughter from you. Many of her friends are mine; they'll welcome me into the settlement. I did not go to them; they came to me."

Mowbray knew this was true. His own younger son firmly believed in Harding. Kenwyne, who had fastidious tastes, was his friend. There were others Mowbray could think of, and all were men of character and standing.

"May I ask how long you have entertained these views about my daughter?"

"Since the first time I saw her, and that was very soon after I came to this neighborhood. I knew as soon as she spoke to me that I would never marry any one else."

Mowbray studied him. He had not suspected Harding of romantic tendencies, but the man was obviously serious.

"Has she any reason to suspect your feelings?" he asked.

"The best of reasons; I have told her on more than one occasion. Still, I can't claim that she approves of me."

Had Harding made his proposal earlier, it would not have been entertained for a moment, but Mowbray had suffered during the last few days. He had found that it cost him more than he had expected to disregard his daughter's inclinations, and he shrank from doing so again. Then he owed much to Hard-

ing, who had behaved with somewhat surprising good taste. After all, if Beatrice were fond of him — Mowbray stopped here, feeling that the matter must be settled at once. He determined to confront the girl with Harding and learn the truth.

"I hope to give you an answer in a few minutes," he said, and left the room.

Somewhat to his surprise, Mrs. Mowbray agreed to his plan, and when he went back to his study he and Harding waited until Beatrice entered. She was highly strung but calm, though a trace of color crept into her face as she glanced at Harding.

"Gerald is safe," Mowbray told her. "Mr. Harding, who has acted very generously, has ensured that. Now he asks that I should allow you to marry him."

Beatrice look startled; her face grew dead-white and her expression strained.

"After what he has learned about us he is very rash. But this is not generosity!"

Mowbray stopped Harding, who would have spoken.

"I see that I did not make his meaning clear. He merely asks that I withdraw my objections, and not that I try to influence your decision. I am willing to do the former, but you must make your choice."

Beatrice gave Harding a swift, grateful look.

"I am sorry I misunderstood. I should have known you better," she said in a very low voice.

Then she was silent for a moment, with downcast eyes, and the two men waited tensely. When she looked up her eyes glistened with tears; but behind the tears there shone a great happiness.

"It is not hard to decide," she murmured, reaching her hand out timidly toward Harding.

He grasped it eagerly, and Mowbray forced himself to smile. In spite of the Colonel's prejudices, he felt that his daughter's quiet confidence in the prairie man was justified.

"I sincerely wish you well," he said. He laid one hand on Harding's arm, and there was a tremor in his voice as he continued: "We have not agreed on many points, but I have learned that you can be trusted. I am glad to remember it now."

"Thank you, sir," said Harding. "I know the value of what you have given me."

After a few more words Mowbray let them go, and when they sat together on the large black settle in a corner of the hall, the girl was conscious of a calm tenderness for her lover that was stronger than anything she had yet felt.

"Craig," she said softly, "I wasn't brave enough when you first urged me, but the hesitation I then felt has gone, and I am ashamed of it. I know that I am safe with you."

"Thank you for that," he answered and his face grew compassionate. "But you look very tired and distressed."

"I am tired — but I'm happy." A faint flush tinted her cheeks and she smiled shyly. "The last few days have been very trying, Craig; and when there seemed to be no way out, then I knew that I wanted you. Now I am still half dazed; my escape seems so wonderful!"

"I know," Harding said gently. "I was sorry for you all. It must have been hard for your father, but one can see his point of view. You must forget about it, dear. I am starting for Winnipeg to-mor-

row, and may be there a week. You will have time to get used to things before I come back."

"You are very considerate, and even kinder than I thought."

He smiled into her eyes.

"I am going to leave you now, because I feel that I ought to. But you know I want to stay!"

He lifted the hand she gave him and kissed it tenderly. Then a swift flood surged through him.

"Beatrice!" he breathed. "Oh, Beatrice! You don't know what it means to me!"

The little fingers were nearly crushed in his strong grasp; but he released them quickly and turned away.

"Good-by, dear!" he said.

Beatrice let him go, but her look was strangely tender and her heart beat fast. He had shown a fine unselfishness, and a tact that was perhaps remarkable. She had no hesitation about him now.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE REBUFF

HARDING spent a busy week in Winnipeg, carrying out a scheme he had agreed upon with Broadwood, Kenwyne, and one or two others, though he feared it would again bring him into conflict with Colonel Mowbray. He regretted this, but he could not allow it to influence him. Allenwood, in which he now had a strong interest, must not be allowed to suffer because of the Colonel's old-fashioned opinions. Harding saw what ought to be done; and he felt that to leave it undone, in order to save himself trouble, would be weak and, in a sense, treacherous to those who now looked to him for a lead. He could not act against his convictions; he must do what he thought best, and take the consequences.

The storekeepers and implement dealers in the small settlements had many bad debts, and their charges were proportionately high, but Harding did not see why he and his friends should pay for the defaulters. Expensive machines were needed; and new wheat was being produced which would resist drought and ripen soon enough to escape the autumn frost; but local dealers were unable, or perhaps too careless, to obtain the seed. Then, Harding saw that a time was coming when mixed farming produce, which he called truck, would be in strong demand; and it was his custom to anticipate a need. Kenwyne and the others recognized

the desirability of this, and had agreed to open a joint agency in Winnipeg. Harding was not sure that the expense could be recouped for a time, but he believed the undertaking would pay in the end.

After finding a suitable office, he called on a number of business men and the flour-millers who were then beginning what was to become the leading industry of the city. He wanted to learn their views about the kind of wheat best suited to their use, and to enter into direct relations with them. On the whole, he succeeded better than he had hoped, and had now only to appoint an agent. Two or three suitable men had offered their services, and it was difficult to decide.

He was thinking over the matter in the newly opened office, when Gerald came in. The Mowbray black sheep seemed to feel no embarrassment in meeting him, for his manner was inclined to be patronizing. Sitting down, he lighted a cigarette.

"This is a new venture. I don't know that it will meet with general approval at Allenwood," he remarked.

"One mustn't expect too much," Harding answered. "I guess the people who object now will come round by and by."

"I wonder how long you think it will be before my father falls into line," said Gerald with a careless laugh. "Everything considered, I rather admire your pluck."

Harding let this pass. It was not a tactful allusion to his engagement to Beatrice, and he was annoyed by Gerald's manner. He had not expected much gratitude, but the fellow did not even seem to realize that Harding had saved him from jail.

"I suppose you know I have been turned out of Allenwood," Gerald resumed.

Harding admitted that he had been told so.

"Since then I've heard from the Government people that they're not likely to want me for the new survey. As a matter of fact, I'm not sorry. The last man I went into the woods with was a sour, exacting brute."

"They've got to be hard. It isn't easy to run a line through a rough country."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," Gerald replied with feeling. "Well, I've been here a week, and can't find any congenial occupation."

"You don't look worried about it."

Gerald laughed.

"Oh, I'm not, as a rule, despondent; and I knew that I could as a last resort fall back on you. This explains my call. I believe you want an agent to manage your office."

Harding's expression indicated ironical amusement.

"Do you think what you have just told me is a recommendation for the job?"

"It seems to prove my need of it."

"But not your suitability. I'm not looking for a man whom nobody else will have."

Gerald looked at him in astonishment. Though he had not given the matter much thought, he had imagined that Harding would be glad to do him a favor for his sister's sake. It was something of a shock to be refused. And the manner of the refusal was mortifying. The fellow was a coarser brute than he had thought; but Gerald did not mean to let his resentment run away with him.

"I have a few useful qualifications," he said.

"Some of the bigger implement dealers and the heads of the milling firms are men of taste and education. It's possible they might rather deal with me than with a drummer fellow, or a raw farmer fresh from the soil."

"I'm fresh from the soil, but I guess I could run this end of the business," Harding returned.

Gerald saw that he had blundered; but he did not feel beaten yet.

"Perhaps I'd better mention that I spoke to Kenwyne and Broadwood, and they were willing that I should have the agency."

"That's so. I have a letter from Kenwyne, who says he'd like to give you a lift, but leaves me to decide."

"Then his wishes ought to count. You must see that your position at Allenwood won't be easy; it will need some tact to make it comfortable, and your giving me the post would go a long distance in your favor. You can't afford to disregard our people's feelings until you've made your footing good."

"Can I not?" Harding's patience was exhausted. "Have I ever tried to gain your friends' favor by indulging any of their crank notions? If necessary, I'll put my plans through in spite of the crowd!" He checked himself. "But this has nothing to do with the matter. You're not the man I want."

"May I inquire what kind of a man you do want?"

"First of all, one I can trust."

Gerald colored, but he got up with some dignity and moved toward the door.

"You may regret your decision," he said threateningly.

Harding sat silent until the door closed, and then he went over to the window and looked out at the narrow street with a frown. He was angry, but he did not think he had been too severe. It was plain that he might have made things easier for himself by falling in with Gerald's suggestion; the fellow was a favorite at Allenwood, where his last offense was known only to one or two people. Harding had no doubt that Mowbray would have appreciated his giving his son another chance; and Beatrice would have thought it generous. For all that, the business of the settlement could not be done by wastrels; and Harding felt that he could not secure a personal advantage by a breach of trust.

Gerald's feelings about the matter were far from pleasant. Returning to his second-class hotel he endeavored to solace them with a drink before he sat down in the untidy lounge to consider. He had been grossly insulted; but he persuaded himself that this did not trouble him most. The worst was that Harding was a coarse, low-bred brute, and was, unfortunately, going to marry Beatrice. Gerald had not hesitated about sacrificing his sister to save himself, but it was easy for him now to feel that she was making a grave mistake. It was perhaps curious that he had preserved a keen sense of family pride, and a belief that people of his station must keep up their dignity; but he was honest as far as he went. He knew that he had by no means lived up to his creed; but, while some allowances must be made for men, this did not apply to women. It was essential that they should remember what was due to their birth and rank. On no account should a well-bred girl marry beneath her.

He went to the bar for another drink, and afterward became convinced that Beatrice's marriage to Harding could only end in disaster. It must, therefore, be prevented. He could not see how this was to be done, but chance might provide a means.

In the meanwhile he was confronted by the stern necessity for earning his living. Taking up a newspaper, he studied the advertisements; but unfortunately there seemed to be no demand for people with refined tastes and polite accomplishments in Canada. Farm teamsters were wanted, and shovel hands for a branch railroad; but these occupations did not appeal to Gerald. A clerk was required at a new hotel. Well, that was more in his line, and he set off to interview the proprietor. After a few curt questions the man dismissed him, and Gerald spent the next day or two moodily walking about the town, until it occurred to him that he had better see what Davies could do. The fellow, who knew the worst of him, owed him something. He felt much less bitter against the moneylender, who had helped to ruin him, than he did against Harding, whom he had injured.

Davies was disengaged when Gerald entered.

"So you're up against it!" he remarked. "Your friends at Allenwood have no use for you?"

"It looks like that. Otherwise I wouldn't have come here."

"I see they're opening an office in this city."

"Harding's in charge. I don't get on with him."

"Well, perhaps that's natural." Davies was keen enough to notice the rancor in Gerald's tone. He was afraid his plans about Allenwood might have to be abandoned, but if he were able to go on with them,

Harding would prove his most dangerous opponent.

"I guess Mr. Harding talked pretty straight to you?" he suggested.

"He took an unfair advantage of my position!"

"So you thought you'd strike me for a job? I guess you know you're not worth much."

Gerald winced at this, but he could not resent it. His father had disowned him, and, except for a surreptitious gift from his mother, he had no resources.

"It's plain that I can't insist upon good terms," he replied. "I quite expected you to see it."

Davies considered. He did not suspect Mowbray of any fondness for steady work, and he thought his services as a clerk would be dear at five dollars a week; but the fellow was shrewd and plausible, and had what Davies called tone. Well-brought-up young Englishmen and a few Americans of the same stamp were coming into Manitoba looking for land, and Mowbray, who understood these people, might act as a decoy. Then, he knew all about Allenwood, and this knowledge might be useful later. On the whole, Davies thought he would take the risk of employing him.

"Well," he said, "I'll make you an offer."

It was not an advantageous one for Gerald, but after some objections he accepted it, and the next day reluctantly set to work. His occupation, however, proved less unpleasant than he had feared, and at the end of a few weeks Davies thought he had acted wisely. Mowbray was intelligent and unscrupulous, his judgment was good, and Davies began to take him into his confidence.

Harding, in the meanwhile, appointed an agent and went home. He hired a horse at the railroad settle-

ment, and the first of the Allenwood farmsteads were rising above the edge of the plain when a mounted figure appeared near a bluff that the trail skirted. The figure was small and distant, but it cut sharp against the evening light, and Harding's heart beat fast as he recognized it. Touching his horse with the quirt, he rode on at a gallop and pulled up near Beatrice with an exultant gleam in his eyes.

"This is very kind!" he cried.

She looked at him shyly, with some color in her face.

"Didn't you expect me to meet you? How far have you ridden at that furious pace?"

"Since I saw you quite a way back. The horse wouldn't come fast enough!"

She smiled at him.

"If you are not in a great hurry to get home, let's walk as far as the ridge," she suggested.

Harding, springing down, held out his hand, and when she slipped from the saddle he caught her in his arms and held her fast while he kissed her. Beatrice was not demonstrative, but he felt her arms tighten about his neck, and the soft pressure of her cheek upon his face, and it gave him a thrill of triumph. Now he realized all that he had won.

For a long while they did not speak. Then Beatrice freed herself with a soft laugh, and they walked on across the prairie. But Harding would not release one little hand, which he clung to as they climbed the trail together.

The red sunset burned in front of them with the edge of the plain cutting against it in a hard, straight line. Above the lurid glow the wide arch of sky shone a vivid green, and the great sweep of grass ran

forward steeped in deepening shades of blue. There was something mysteriously impressive in the half light and the riot of color.

"What a glorious evening!" Beatrice could not help exclaiming. "I am glad I shall not have to leave the prairie."

The crimson flush on the skyline merged into rose and magenta and mauve.

"It is lighted up in your honor," Harding said.

"You have a pretty imagination; but I fear the gray days are more in keeping with the life I've led It was often rather dreary at the Grange, and I felt that I was objectless — drifting on without a purpose." She smiled at Harding. "You can't understand the feeling?"

"No," he said. "All my life I've had too much to do. One gets self-centered through thinking only of one's work. It may be better to stop now and then and look about."

"It depends upon what you see. If your surroundings never change, you come to know them too well and begin to think that nothing different is possible. It makes one narrow. We may both need patience, Craig, before we learn to understand each other's point of view."

Harding realized the truth of this. They looked at many things differently, and there were points on which their convictions were opposed.

She gave the strong hand that held hers a slight pressure of caress.

"I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been driven out of my way by the grass fire that night?" she questioned, woman-like.

"Nothing would have been different. I was bound to meet you sooner or later."

She laughed contentedly, and they walked on in silence for a while. Harding felt that he ought to tell her about Gerald, but he hesitated.

"Tell me what you have been doing in Winnipeg," she said, as if she had divined his thoughts.

He explained his business there carefully, and Beatrice was pleased that he took her interest and comprehension for granted.

"Gerald wanted me to make him our agent, and I refused," he ended.

She was conscious of disappointment, though she appreciated his candor.

"I'm afraid he will find things hard. Of course, it's his own fault, but that won't make his difficulties lighter. Couldn't you have taken the risk of giving him another chance?"

"No," said Harding. "I wanted to help him, for your sake, but I couldn't give him the post. You see, I was acting for others as well as for myself." He hesitated before he added: "I felt that we must have the best man we could get."

"And you could get more reliable men than my brother! Unfortunately, it's true. But the others were willing; Kenwyne told me so."

He looked at her in surprise, for there was a faint hardness in her voice.

"I don't think they quite understood how important the matter is. Anyway, they left it to me and I felt forced to do what seemed best for all."

"Well," she said, as if puzzled, "Gerald certainly wronged you."

"That didn't count; not the wrong you mean. The greatest injury he could have done me would have been in giving you to Brand. However, it was not this, but his unfitness for our work that made me refuse him."

He had blundered, and Beatrice felt hurt. She could have forgiven him for bitterly resenting Gerald's attempt to separate them, but he seemed to consider that comparatively unimportant. There was a hard strain in him; perhaps her father had been right in thinking him too deeply imbued with the commercial spirit.

He helped her to the saddle, and the misunderstanding was forgotten as they rode in confidential talk across the shadowy plain until the lights of the Grange twinkled out ahead. Harding left her at the forking of the trail, but he was thoughtful as he trotted home alone. He must exercise care and tact in future. Beatrice was proud, and he feared that he had not altogether won her yet.

CHAPTER XXVI

DROUGHT

THE wheat was growing tall and changing to a darker shade; when the wind swept through it, it undulated like the waves of a vast green sea, rippling silver and white where the light played on the bending blades.

Harding lay among the dusty grass in a dry sloo, and Hester sat beside him in the blue shadow of the big hay wagon. Since six o'clock that morning Harding and Devine had been mowing prairie hay. They had stopped long enough to eat the lunch Hester had brought them; and now Devine had returned to his work, and sat jolting in the driving-seat of a big machine as he guided three powerful horses along the edge of the grass. It went down in dry rows, ready for gathering, before the glistening knife, and a haze of dust and a cloud of flies followed the team across the sloo. Harding's horses stood switching their tails in the sunshine that flooded the plain with a dazzling glare.

"It was rough on Fred that you wouldn't let him finish his pipe," Harding said.

"He went obediently," Hester answered with a smile. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I suspected something of the kind; but I can't see why you must stop me now."

"You are away at daybreak and come home late."

"Very well," said Harding resignedly. "But I've got to clean up this sloo by dark."

"Then you're not going to the Grange? You haven't been since Sunday."

"Beatrice understands that I'm busy."

"That's fortunate. It's not nice to feel neglected. Can't you take your mind off your farming for a little while, Craig?"

"It's my job. What's more, sticking to it seems the best way of making things easier for Beatrice. I'm an outsider at Allenwood and have got to justify my unorthodox notions by success. I haven't much polish and I'm not a good talker, but I can grow wheat — and luckily that comes into the scheme."

"It may, perhaps. When are you to be married, Craig?"

"I don't know. Beatrice puts it off. I had hoped it might be after harvest, but nothing's settled yet."

"Then you ought to be firm and insist upon fixing the wedding soon."

"I wish I could. But why?"

"Because it might be better not to leave Beatrice among her friends too long."

Harding looked surprised.

"Since the Colonel's given in, and Gerald's gone, I don't think there is anybody who would try to turn her against me."

"No," agreed Hester. "Her parents would be angry if she broke her engagement. Now that they have accepted you, you can count on their support, even if they're not quite satisfied with the match. The trouble is that you and they belong to very different

schools. They'll try to make the best of you, but Beatrice will see how hard they find it."

"Hurrying on the wedding won't help much."

"It might. Beatrice will try to accept her husband's views, and she'll probably find it easier than she thinks; but at present all she sees and hears will remind her of the changes she will have to make. Things you do will not seem right; some of your ideas will jar. Then the other women will let her see that they feel sorry for her and think she's throwing herself away. She'll deny it, but it will hurt."

"Perhaps that's true," said Harding. "But talking of the wedding raises another question. I want a better house, and when I build I may as well locate at Allenwood."

"Then you are still determined on getting control there?"

"I don't want control, but I may have to take it," Harding answered. "The settlement will fall to bits if it's left alone, and I suspect that I'm the only man who can hold it up. I'm glad you have talked to me. What you've said makes it clear that I've not time to lose. Now, however, this hay must be cut."

He led his team into the grass when Hester went away, but although he worked hard until dark fell, his mind was busy with many things beside the clattering machine.

A few days later he had occasion to visit Winnipeg, and after some talk with his agent there, he asked him:

"Do you know how Davies is fixed just now, Jackson?"

"I don't know much about him personally, but men in his line of business are feeling the set-back.

They've bought options on land there's no demand for, and can't collect accounts; farmers with money seem to have stopped coming in; and the small homesteaders are going broke. Doesn't seem to be any money in the country, and credit's played out."

"Then it ought to be a good time to pick up land cheap, and I want you to find a broker who'll ask Davies what he'll take for two or three mortgages he holds on Allenwood. My name's not to be mentioned; you must get a man who can handle the matter cautiously."

"I know one; but, if you don't mind my asking, could you put a deal of that kind through?"

"I must," said Harding. "It will be a strain, but the crop's coming on well and I ought to have a surplus after harvest."

"Isn't the dry weather hurting you?"

"Not yet. We can stand for another week or two if the wind's not too bad. Anyhow, you can find out whether Davies is inclined to trade."

When Harding went out into the street, he was met by a cloud of swirling dust. He wiped the grit from his eyes and brushed it off his clothes with an annoyance that was not accounted for by the slight discomfort it caused him. The sun was fiercely hot, the glare trying, and the plank sidewalks and the fronts of the wooden stores had begun to crack. Sand and cement from half-finished buildings were blowing down the street; and when Harding stopped to watch a sprinkler at work on a lawn at the corner of an avenue where frame houses stood among small trees, the glistening shower vanished as it fell. There were fissures in the hard soil and the grass looked burnt.

But it was the curious, hard brightness of the sky and the way the few white clouds swept across it that gave Harding food for thought.

The soil of the Western prairie freezes deep, and, thawing slowly, retains moisture for the wheat plant for some time; but the June rain had been unusually light. Moreover, the plains rise in three or four table-lands as they run toward the Rockies, and the strength of the northwest wind increases with their elevation. It was blowing fresh in the low Red River basin, but it would be blowing harder farther west, where there are broken, sandy belts. After a period of dry weather, the sand drives across the levels with disastrous consequences to any crops in the neighborhood. This, however, was a danger that could not be guarded against.

The next day Jackson reported about the mortgages.

"Davies was keen on business and offered my man improved preemptions in a dozen different townships," he said. "Pressed him to go out and take a look at them; but when he heard the buyer wanted an Allenwood location he wouldn't trade."

"What do you gather from that?"

"The thing seems pretty plain, and what I've found out since yesterday agrees with my conclusions. Davies is pressed for money, but he means to hold on to Allenwood as long as he can. A good harvest would help him because he'd then be able to get in some money from his customers."

"A good harvest would help us all; but there's not much hope of it unless the weather changes. In the meanwhile, we'll let the matter drop, because I don't want to give the fellow a hint about my plans."

Nearing home on the following evening, Harding pulled up his horse on the edge of the wheat as he saw Devine coming to meet him.

"What's the weather been like?" he asked, getting down from the rig.

"Bad," said Devine gloomily. "Hot and blowing hard."

Harding looked about as they crossed a stretch of grass that had turned white and dry. The sunset was red and angry, but above the horizon the sky was a hard, dark blue that threatened wind. Everything was very still now, but the men knew the breeze would rise again soon after daybreak. They said nothing for a time after they stopped beside the wheat.

The soil was thinly covered with sand, and the tall blades had a yellow, shriveled look, while the stems were bent and limp. Harding gathered a few and examined them. They were scored with fine lines as if they had been cut by a sharp file.

"Not serious yet, but the grain won't stand for much more of this."

"That's so," Devine agreed. "The sand hasn't got far in, but I guess it will work right through unless we have a change. If not, there'll be trouble for both of us this fall."

"Sure," said Harding curtly. "Bring the horse, Fred, and we'll drive on to the rise."

They presently alighted where the plain merged into a belt of broken country, dotted with clumps of scrub birch and poplar. It rolled in ridges and hollows, but the harsh grass which thinly covered its surface had shriveled and left bare banks of sand, which lay about the slopes in fantastic shapes as they

had drifted. Harding stooped and took up a handful. It was hot and felt gritty. The broken ground ran on as far as he could see, and the short, stunted trees looked as if they had been scorched. Glowing red in the dying sunset, the desolate landscape had a strangely sinister effect.

"The stuff's as hard and sharp as steel," he said, throwing down the sand. "There's enough of it to wipe out all the crops between Allenwood and the frontier if the drought lasts."

"What we want is a good big thunderstorm. This blamed sand-belt's a trouble we never reckoned on."

"No," said Harding. "I took a look at it when I was picking my location, but there was plenty of grass, and the brush was strong and green. Guess they'd had more rain the last two or three years. I figured out things pretty carefully — and now the only setback I didn't allow for is going to pull me up! Well, we must hope for a change of weather; there's nothing else to be done."

He turned away with a gloomy face, and they walked back to the rig. Harding had early seen that Beatrice would not be an easy prize. It was not enough, entrancing as it was, to dream over her beauty, her fastidious daintiness in manners and thought, her patrician calm, and the shy tenderness she now and then showed for him. The passionate thrill her voice and glance brought him spurred him rather to action. First of all, he must work and fight for her, and he had found a keen pleasure in the struggle. One by one he had pulled down the barriers between them; but now, when victory seemed secure, an obstacle he could not overcome had suddenly risen.

All his strength of mind and body counted for nothing against the weather. Beatrice could not marry a ruined man; it was unthinkable that he should drag her down to the grinding care and drudgery that formed the lot of a broken farmer's wife. He was helpless, and could only wait and hope for rain.

When he had finished his work the next evening he drove over to the Grange, feeling depressed and tired, for he had begun at four o'clock that morning. It was very hot: a fiery wind still blew across the plain, although the sun had set, and Beatrice was sitting on the veranda with her mother and Mowbray. They had a languid air, and the prairie, which had turned a lifeless gray, looked strangely dreary as it ran back into the gathering dark.

"Not much hope of a change!" Mowbray remarked.

Beatrice gave Harding a sympathetic glance, and unconsciously he set his lips tight. She looked cool and somehow ethereal in her thin white dress and her eyes were gentle. It was horrible to think that he might have to give her up; but he knew it might come to this.

"You're tired; I'm afraid you have been working too hard," Beatrice said gently.

"The weather accounts for it, not the work," he answered. "It's depressing to feel that all you've done may lead to nothing."

"Very true," Mowbray assented. "You're fortunate if this is the first time you have been troubled by the feeling. Many of us have got used to it; but one must go on."

"It's hard to fight a losing battle, sir."

"It is," said Mowbray grimly. "That it really does not matter in the end whether you lose or not, so long as you're on the right side, doesn't seem to give one much consolation. But your crop strikes me as looking better than ours."

"I plowed deep; the sub-soil holds the moisture. Of course, with horse-traction ——"

Harding hesitated, but Mowbray smiled.

"I can't deny that your machines have their advantages," the Colonel said. "They'd be useful if you could keep them in their place as servants; the danger is that they'll become your masters. When you have bought them you must make them pay, and that puts you under the yoke of an iron thing that demands to be handled with the sternest economy. The balance sheet's the only standard it leaves you — and you have to make some sacrifices if you mean to come out on the credit side. Your finer feelings and self-respect often have to go."

"I'm not sure they need go; but, in a way, you're right. You must strike a balance, or the machines that cost so much will break you. For all that, it's useful as a test; the result of bad work shows when you come to the reckoning. I can't see that to avoid waste must be demoralizing."

"It isn't. The harm begins when you set too high a value on economical efficiency."

Harding did not answer, and there was silence for a time. Mrs. Mowbray had a headache from the heat, and Beatrice felt limp. She noticed the slackness of Harding's pose and felt sorry for him. He differed from her father, and she could not think he was always right, but he was honest; indeed, it was his strong

sincerity that had first attracted her. She liked his strength and boldness; the athletic symmetry of his form had its effect; but what struck her most was his freedom from what the Canadians contemptuously called meanness. Beatrice was fastidiously refined in some respects, and she thought of him as clean. Unconsciously she forgave him much for this, because he jarred upon her now and then. Her father's old-fashioned ideals were touched with a grace that her lover could not even admire, but, watching him as he sat in the fading light, she felt that he was trustworthy.

Mosquitos began to invade the veranda, and Mrs. Mowbray was driven into the house. The Colonel presently followed her, and Beatrice, leaving her chair, cuddled down beside Harding on the steps.

"Craig," she said, "you're quiet to-night."

"This dry weather makes one think; and then there's the difference between your father and myself. He wants to be just, but there's a natural antagonism between us that can't be got over."

"It isn't personal, dear."

"No," said Harding; "we're antagonistic types. The trouble is that you must often think as he does — and I wouldn't have you different."

"That's dear of you, Craig. But, even if we don't agree always, what does it matter? I like you because you're so candid and honest. You would never hide anything you thought or did from me."

They sat there in the gathering gloom. An early owl ventured out and hooted from his sheltered tree-top; a chorus of frogs down in the lake sent back an indignant reply; a honeysuckle vine that climbed over

the veranda flaunted its perfumed blossoms to the hot, night air, luring pollen-bearers.

To Harding, the worries of the day were, for the moment, forgotten: a great peace filled him. And over the girl, as she felt his strong arm around her, there rested a deep, satisfying sense of security and trust.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ADVENTURESS

BEFORE the wheat had suffered serious damage, a few thunder showers broke upon the plain, and Harding and his neighbors took courage. The crop was not out of danger; indeed, a week's dry weather would undo the good the scanty rain had done; but ruin, which had seemed imminent, was, at least, delayed. Then Harding got news from his agent that necessitated his return to Winnipeg, and Mrs. Mowbray and Beatrice, who wished to visit the millinery stores, arranged to accompany him.

It was hot and dry when they reached the city, but Harding was of sanguine temperament and, being relieved from fear of immediate disaster, proceeded with his plans for the consolidation of Allenwood. He could not carry them far, because even if he secured an abundant harvest, which was at present doubtful, he would have some difficulty in raising capital enough to outbid his rival. Acting cautiously with Jackson's help, however, he found two men who had lent Davies money and were now frankly alarmed by the general fall in values. One, indeed, was willing to transfer his interest to Harding on certain terms which the latter could not accept.

He was thinking over these matters one morning when, to his surprise, he saw Brand crossing the

street toward him. They had not met since the evening of their encounter with Davies at the Grange, and Harding was sensible of some constraint. Brand was a reserved man whom he had neither understood nor liked, but he had thought him honorable until he learned the price he had demanded for helping Mowbray.

There was no embarrassment in Brand's manner. He looked as cool and inscrutable as usual.

"I'm rather glad we have met," he said.

"I thought you had gone back to the Old Country," Harding replied.

"No; I find it harder to sell my farm than I imagined. The settlement covenant's the trouble, and I don't feel inclined to give the land away. I want a talk with you. Will you come to my hotel?"

Harding agreed, and a few minutes later they sat down in a quiet corner of the hotel lounge.

"How's your campaign against the moneylender progressing?" Brand began abruptly.

"Then you know something about it?"

"I'm not a fool. I've been watching the game with interest for some time. I have a reason for asking; you can be frank with me."

Harding knew when to trust a man and, in spite of what had happened, he trusted Brand. When he had given him a short explanation, Brand seemed satisfied.

"Very well; now I have something to say. My prejudices are against you; they're on Mowbray's side, but I'm beginning to see that his position is untenable. It seems I can't get a fair price for my farm, and after spending some happy years on it, I have a sentimental affection for the place. Don't know that I'd care to

see it fall into the hands of some raw English lad whose inexperience would be a danger to Allenwood. The drift of all this is — will you work the land for me if we can make a satisfactory arrangement?"

Harding hesitated.

"I don't know that I could take a favor ——"

"From me? Don't make a mistake. I'm not acting out of any personal regard for you. On the whole, I'd rather see you in control of Allenwood than a mortgage broker; that's all."

"Thanks! On that understanding we might come to terms."

"Then there's another matter. Managing my farm won't help you much, and I feel that I owe something to the settlement. If it looks as if the moneylender would be too strong for you, and you're short of funds, you can write to me. I can afford to spend something on Allenwood's defense."

They talked it over, and when Harding left the hotel he had promised, in case of necessity, to ask Brand's help. Moreover, although he had not expected this, he felt some sympathy and a half reluctant liking for his beaten rival.

During the same day Davies had a confidential talk with Gerald.

"Do you know that your mother and sister are in town with Harding?" he asked.

"Yes; but I haven't seen them yet."

"Rather not meet Harding? Are you pleased that the man's going to marry your sister?"

"I'm not!" Gerald answered curtly.

He stopped writing and frowned at the book in which he was making an entry. He felt very bitter

against Harding, who had insulted him, but he was moved by a deeper and less selfish feeling. It jarred upon his sense of fitness that his sister should marry a low-bred fellow with whom he was convinced she could not live happily. Beatrice had lost her head, but she was a Mowbray and would recover her senses; then she would rue the mistake she had made. She might resent Gerald's interference and would, no doubt, suffer for a time if he succeeded in separating her from her lover; but men, as he knew, got over an irregular passion, and he had no reason to believe that women were different.

"She will marry him unless something is done," Davies resumed cunningly.

"What is that to you?"

"Well, I think you can guess my hand. His marrying your sister would give Harding some standing at Allenwood, and he's already got more influence there than suits me. The fellow's dangerous; I hear he's been getting at one or two of the men who backed me. But we'll quit fencing. Do you want to stop this match?"

Although he had fallen very low, Gerald felt the humiliation of allowing Davies to meddle with the Mowbray affairs; but he overcame his repugnance, because the man might be of help.

"Yes," he answered shortly; "but I don't see how it can be stopped."

"You knew Coral Stanton in your more prosperous days, didn't you?"

Gerald admitted it. Miss Stanton described herself as a clairvoyante, but although there were then in the Western cities ladies of her profession who confined

themselves to forecasting the changes of the markets and fortune-telling, the term had to some extent become conventionalized and conveyed another meaning. Coral had arrived in Winnipeg with a third-rate opera company, which she left after a quarrel with the manager's wife; and although it was known that gambling for high stakes went on in her consulting rooms, she had for a time avoided trouble with the civic authorities. The girl was of adventurous turn of mind and was marked by an elfish love of mischief.

"I can't see what my knowing Coral has to do with the matter," Gerald replied.

"Then I'll have to explain. Things have been going wrong with her since the Ontario lumber man was doped in her rooms. The police have given her warning, and I guess she wouldn't stick at much if she saw a chance of earning a hundred dollars easily."

"What d'you suggest that she should do?"

"If you'll listen for a few minutes, I'll tell you."

Davies chuckled as he unfolded a plan that appealed to his broad sense of humor; but Gerald frowned. Although likely to result to her ultimate benefit, the plot was, in the first place, directed against his sister. It was repugnant in several ways, but he thought it would work, for Beatrice, like his mother, had Puritanical views. Besides, he could think of nothing else.

"Well," he said, "will you talk to Coral?"

"Certainly not," Davies answered cautiously; "that's your part of the business. I'll put up the money."

The following day Harding was lunching with Beatrice and her mother at their hotel, when the wait-

ress brought him a note. Beatrice, sitting next to him, noticed that it was addressed in a woman's hand and was heavily scented. Indeed, there was something she disliked in the insidious perfume. She watched Harding as he opened the envelope and saw that what he read disturbed him. This struck her as curious, but she did not see the note. He thrust it into his pocket and began to talk about something of no importance.

Beatrice thought over the incident during the afternoon, but by evening she had banished it from her mind. After dinner they sat in the big rotunda of the hotel. Harding was unusually quiet, but Beatrice scarcely noticed it, for she was interested in watching the people who sauntered in and out through the revolving glass door. They were of many different types: wiry, brown-faced plainsmen; silent, grave-eyed fellows from the forest belt; smart bank clerks and traders; mechanics; and a few women. One or two seemed to be needy adventurers, but they came and went among the rest, though it was obvious that they could not be staying at the hotel.

Beatrice's attention was suddenly attracted by a girl who came in. She was handsome, dressed in the extreme of fashion, and marked by a certain rakish boldness that was not unbecoming. Beatrice was struck by the darkness of her hair and the brilliance of her color, until she saw that something was due to art; then she noticed a man smile at another as he indicated the girl, and two more turn and look after her when she passed. Thereupon Beatrice grew pitiful, ashamed and angry, for she could not tell which of the feelings predominated; and she wondered why the hotel people

had not prevented the girl's entrance. She was pleased to see that Harding was talking to a man who had joined him and had noticed nothing.

Her life at the Grange had been somewhat austere, and her relatives were old-fashioned people of high character who condemned what they called modern laxity. For all that, the adventuress roused her curiosity, and she watched her as she moved about the room. She drew near them, and Beatrice thought her eyes rested strangely on Harding for a moment. A strong scent floated about her — the same that had perfumed the note. Beatrice was startled, but she tried to persuade herself that she was mistaken. The adventuress passed on; but when Harding's companion left him she came up at once and gave him an inviting smile. He looked at her in surprise, but there was some color in his face. It was unthinkable that he should know the girl, but she stopped beside him.

"Craig," she cooed, "you don't pretend that you've forgotten me?"

Harding looked at her coldly.

"I have never seen you before in my life!" he said emphatically.

Coral laughed, and Beatrice noticed the music in her voice.

"Aw, come off!" she exclaimed. "What you giving us? Guess you've been getting rich and turned respectable."

Harding cast a quick glance round. Beatrice and Mrs. Mowbray sat near, and it would be difficult to defend himself to either. The girl had made an unfortunate mistake, or perhaps expected to find him an

easy victim; now he began to understand the note. The blood filled his face and he looked guilty in his embarrassment and anger, for he saw that he was helpless. The hotel people would not interfere; and to repulse the woman rudely or run away from her was likely to attract the attention he wished to avoid.

"You have mistaken me for somebody else," he replied uneasily.

She gave him a coquettish smile.

"Well, I guess you're Craig Harding unless you've changed your name as well as your character. I reckoned you'd come back to me when I heard you were in town. You ought to feel proud I came to look for you, when you didn't answer my note."

There was something seductive and graceful in her mocking courtesy, but Harding lost his temper.

"I've had enough! You don't know me, and if you try to play this fool game I'll have you fired out!"

"That to an old friend — and a lady!" she exclaimed. "You've surely lost the pretty manners that made me love you."

Harding turned in desperation, and started to the door; but she followed, putting her hand on his shoulder, and some of the bystanders laughed. Beatrice, quivering with the shock, hated them for their amusement. Even if he were innocent, Harding had placed himself in a horribly humiliating position. But she could not think him innocent. All she had seen and heard condemned him.

Harding shook off the girl's hand and, perhaps alarmed by the look he gave her, she left him and soon afterward disappeared, but when he returned to the

table Beatrice and her mother had gone. He was getting cool again, but he felt crushed, for no defense seemed possible. He could only offer a blunt denial which, in the face of appearances, could hardly be believed.

He left the hotel and spent an hour walking about the city, trying to think what he must do. When he returned a bell-boy brought him word that Mrs. Mowbray wished to see him in the drawing-room. Harding went up and found the room unoccupied except by Beatrice and her mother. The girl's face was white, but it was stern and she had her father's immovable look. Rising as he came in, she stood very straight, holding out a little box.

"This is yours," she said. "I must give it back to you. You will understand what that means."

Harding took the box, containing the ring he had given her, and steadily met her accusing eyes, though he could see no hope for him in them.

"I suppose there's no use in my saying that it's all a mistake or a wicked plot?"

"No; I'm afraid the evidence against you is too strong." She hesitated a moment, and he thought he saw some sign of relenting. "Craig," she begged, in a broken voice, "do go. I — I believed in you."

"You have no reason to doubt me now."

He turned to Mrs. Mowbray.

"Can't you be persuaded? I give you my solemn word ——"

"Don't!" Beatrice interrupted. "Don't make it worse!"

"I'm sorry I must agree with my daughter's decision

until I see more reason to change it than I can hope for at present," Mrs. Mowbray replied. "It would be better if you left us. We return to-morrow."

Her tone was final; and, with a last glance at Beatrice, Harding went out dejectedly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FIRE AND HAIL

ON the morning after her return from Winnipeg, Beatrice sat in her father's study, with Mowbray facing her across the table. He looked thoughtful, but not so shocked and indignant as she had expected.

"So you are determined to throw Harding over!"

"Yes," Beatrice said in a strained voice. "It seems impossible to do anything else."

"A broken engagement's a serious matter; we Mowbrays keep our word. I hope you're quite sure of your ground."

"What I heard left no room for doubt."

"Did you hear the man's defense?"

"I refused to listen," said Beatrice coldly. "That he should try to excuse himself only made it worse."

"I'm not sure that's very logical. I'll confess that Harding and I seldom agree, but one must be fair."

"Does that mean that one ought to be lenient?" Beatrice asked with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

Mowbray was conscious of some embarrassment. His ideas upon the subject were not sharply defined, but if it had not been his daughter who questioned him he could have expressed them better. Beatrice ought to have left her parents to deal with a delicate matter like this, but instead she had boldly taken it

into her own hands. He had tried to bring up his children well, but the becoming modesty which characterized young women in his youth had gone.

"No," he answered; "not exactly lenient. But the thing may not be so bad as you think — and one must make allowances. Then, a broken engagement reflects upon both parties. Even if one of them has an unquestionable grievance, it proves that that person acted very rashly in making a promise in the first instance."

"Yes," said Beatrice; "that is my misfortune. I was rash and easily deceived. I made the bargain in confiding ignorance, without reserve, while the man kept a good deal back."

"But your mother tells me that he declared he had never seen the woman; and Harding is not a liar."

"I used to think so, but it looks as if I were mistaken," Beatrice answered bitterly as she turned away.

Leaving him, she found a quiet spot in the shadow of a bluff, and sat down to grapple with her pain. It had hurt more than she had thought possible to cast off Harding, and she could bear her trouble only by calling pride to her aid. There was, she told herself, much about the man that had from the first offended her, but she had made light of it, believing him steadfast and honorable. Now she knew she had been deceived. She had been ready to throw away all the privileges of her station; she had disregarded her friends' opinion — and this was her reward! The man for whom she would have made the sacrifice was gross and corrupt; but nobody should guess that she found it strangely hard to forget him.

Lance came upon her, there at the edge of the woods; but her head was buried in her arms and she did not see

him. The boy turned at once and went to have a talk with his father. His expression was very resolute when he entered Mowbray's study.

"What are you going to do about Bee's trouble, sir?" he asked abruptly.

His father gave him an amused smile.

"I haven't decided," he said. "Have you anything useful to suggest?"

"I feel that you ought to put it right."

"Can you tell me how?"

"No. Of course, it's a delicate matter; but you have a wider knowledge and experience."

"Umh!" the Colonel grunted. "Why do you conclude that your sister's wrong?"

"I know the man. He's not the kind she thinks."

"Your mother saw the woman, and heard what she said."

"There's been a mistake," Lance persisted. "I've a suspicion that somebody may have put her up to it."

"Made a plot to blacken Harding, you mean? Rather far-fetched, isn't it? Whom do you suspect?"

Lance turned red, for his father's tone was sarcastic, and he thought of Gerald; but he could not drop a hint against his brother.

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out."

"When you have found out, you can tell me," Mowbray answered, and gave the boy an approving smile. "You're quite right in standing by your friend, and you certainly owe Harding something. If you can prove him better than we think, nobody will be more pleased than I."

Lance had to be satisfied with this. He did not

know how to set about his investigations, but he determined to visit Winnipeg as soon as he could.

For the next week or two there was quietness at the Grange. The dry weather held, and boisterous winds swept the sunburned plain. The sod cracked, the wheat was shriveling, and although in public men and women made a brave pretense of cheerfulness, in private they brooded over the ruin that threatened them. To make things worse, three or four days a week, heavy clouds that raced across the sky all morning gathered in solid banks at noon, and then, as if in mockery, broke up and drove away. Few of the settlers had much reserve capital, and the low prices obtained for the last crop had strained their finances; but Harding was, perhaps, threatened most.

He had, as had been his custom, boldly trusted to the earth all he had won by previous effort, and this year it looked as if the soil would refuse its due return. Still, his taking such a risk was only partly due to the prompting of his sanguine temperament. While he had hope of winning Beatrice he must stake his all on the chance of gaining influence and wealth. He had lost her; but after a few black days during which he had thought of abandoning the struggle and letting things drift, he quietly resumed his work. What he had begun must be finished, even if it brought no advantage to himself. The disaster that seemed unavoidable braced him to sterner effort; but when dusk settled down he stood in the dim light and brooded over his withering wheat. Being what he was, a man of constructive genius, it cut deep that he must watch the grain that had cost so much thought and toil go to

waste; but the red band on the prairie's edge and the luminous green above it held only a menace.

One day Harding drove with Devine to a distant farm, and they set out on the return journey late in the afternoon. It was very hot, for the wind had died away, and deep stillness brooded over the lifeless plain. The gophers that made their burrows in the trail had lost their usual briskness, and sat up on their haunches until the wheels were almost upon them. The prairie-chickens the horses disturbed would not rise, but ran a few yards and sank down in the parched grass. The sky was leaden, and the prairie glimmered a curious, livid white. Harding's skin prickled, and he was conscious of a black depression and a headache.

"If this only meant rain!" he exclaimed dejectedly. "But I've given up hope."

"Something's surely coming," Devine replied, glancing at a great bank of cloud that had changed its color to an oily black. "If this weather holds for another week, the crop will be wiped out, but somehow I can't believe we'll all go broke."

Harding had once thought as his comrade did, but now his optimistic courage had deserted him. The future was very dark. He meant to fight on, but defeat seemed certain. It would be easier to bear because he had already lost what he valued most.

Presently the wagon wheels sank in yielding sand, and that roused him.

"Our hauling costs us high with these loose trails. I'd counted on cutting more straw with the crop this year and using it to bind the road. But now we may not have any grain to send out."

The plan was characteristic of him, though his de-

jection was not. As a rule, straw has no value in a newly opened country, and not much is cut with the grain, the tall stubble being burned off; but Harding had seen a use for the waste material in improving the means of transport.

"Well," said Devine, "we'd better hustle. The team won't stand for a storm."

Harding urged the horses, and as the wheels ran out on firm ground the pace grew faster, and a distant bluff began to rise from the waste. When they were a mile or two from the woods there was a rumble of thunder and the light grew dim. The dark sky seemed descending to meet the earth, the bluff grew indistinct, but the burned grass still retained its ghostly whiteness. Then the temperature suddenly fell, and when a puff of cold wind touched his face Harding used the whip. He knew what was going to happen.

Throwing up their heads in alarm as a pale flash glimmered across the trail, the team broke into a gallop, while the light wagon rocked and swung as the wheels jolted over hummocks and smashed through scrubby brush. Harding did not think he could hold the horses in the open when the storm broke, and he did not wish to be hurled across the rugged prairie behind a bolting team. Springing down when they reached the trees, he and Devine locked the wheels and then stood waiting at the horses' heads. All was now very still again, but a gray haze was closing in. Now and then leaves stirred and rustled, and once or twice a dry twig came down. The faint crackle it made jarred on the men's tingling nerves.

Harding found it difficult to keep still. He slowly filled his pipe for the sake of occupation. The match

he struck burned steadily, but its pale flame was suddenly lost in a dazzling glare as the lightning fell in an unbroken fork from overhead to a corner of the bluff. Then the pipe dropped and was trodden on, as the men swayed to and fro, using all their strength to hold the plunging team. It was only for a moment they heard the battering hoofs, for a deafening crash that rolled across the heavens drowned all other sound, and as it died away the trees began to moan. A few large drops of rain fell, and then, as the men watched it, gathering a faint hope, the rain turned to hail. A savage wind struck the bluff, the air got icy cold, and the hail changed from fine grains to ragged lumps. Harding could hear it roar among the trees between the peals of thunder, until the scream of wind and the groan of bending branches joined in and formed a wild tumult of sound.

Though the men stood to lee of the woods, the hail found them out, bruising their faces and cutting their wet hands; even their bodies afterward felt as if they had been beaten. It raked the bluff like rifle-fire, cutting twigs and shredding leaves, and the wild wind swept the wreckage far to leeward. Light branches were flying, and Harding was struck, but his grapple with the maddened horses demanded all his thought. The lightning leaped about them and blazed through the woods, silhouetting bending trees and the horses' tense, wet bodies, before it vanished and left what seemed to be black darkness behind.

Then, when the men were getting exhausted, the thunder grew fainter and the bitter wind died away. There was a strange, perplexing stillness in the heavy gloom, until the cloud-ranks parted and a ray of silver

light broke through. The grass steamed as the beam moved across it, and suddenly the bluff was warm and bright, and they could see the havoc that had been made.

Torn branches hung from the poplars, slender birch-twigs lay in heaps, and banks of hail, now changing fast to water, stretched out into the wet, sparkling plain.

Harding's face was very stern as he picked up a handful of the icy pieces.

"With a strong wind behind it, this stuff would cut like a knife," he said. "Well, it has saved our putting the binders into the grain."

Devine made a sign of gloomy agreement. There was no hope left; the crop they had expected much from was destroyed.

They clambered into the wagon and drove for some time before the first farmstead began to lift above the edge of the plain. In the meanwhile the hail that glistened in the grass tussocks melted away, and only a few dark clouds drifting to the east marred the tranquillity of the summer evening. The men were silent, but Devine understood why his comrade drove so hard, holding straight across dry sloos where the tall grass crackled about the wheels, and over billowy rises where the horses' feet sank deep in sand. He was anxious to learn the worst, and Devine feared that it would prove very bad.

At last they crossed a higher ridge and Harding, looking down, saw his homestead lying warm in the evening light. He had often watched it rise out of the prairie, with a stirring of his blood. It was his; much of it had been built by his own labor; and he had won

from the desolate waste the broad stretch of fertile soil that rolled away behind it. But he now gazed at it with a frown. As the buildings grew into shape, dark patches of summer fallow broke the gray sweep of grass, and then the neutral green of alfalfa and clover, running in regular oblongs, appeared. Behind, extending right across the background, lay the wheat, a smear of indefinite color darker than the plain. That was all they could see of it at that distance. They were going fast, but Harding lashed the horses in his impatience.

Devine, however, looked more closely about, and it struck him that the ground had dried with remarkable rapidity; indeed, if he had not felt the hail, he could hardly have believed the plain had been wet. For all that, not venturing to hope for fear of meeting a heavier shock, he said nothing to his comrade, and presently they dipped into a hollow. They could not see across the ridge in front, and Harding urged his horses savagely when they came to the ascent. The animals' coats were foul, spume dripped from the bits, and their sides were white where the traces slapped, but they breasted the hill pluckily. The men were grim and highly strung, braced to meet the worst. To Harding it meant ruin and the downfall of all his plans; to Devine his wedding put off. It might be some years before he made good, and he feared that he could no longer count on his comrade's help. If Harding were forced to give up his farm, he might leave the prairie.

At last, when the suspense was telling upon both, they reached the summit and Harding stood up to see better.

"Why, the ground has not been wet!" he exclaimed, unbelieving. "The hail has not touched us!"

It was true; the fire and the ragged ice had passed over that belt of prairie and left its wake of ruin farther on. Still, though the wheat was none the worse, it was none the better. It stood as when they had seen it last, limp from drought and cut by blowing sand. Disaster was only suspended, not removed. But there was hope.

"Things don't look half so bad as they might!" said Harding cheerfully. "I don't deserve it. I got savage and bitter; and bitterness is a bad substitute for grit. Now I'll brace up, and face the future the way a man ought!"

CHAPTER XXIX

A BRAVE HEART

THREE days passed, and still no rain fell to save the withering grain. On the evening of the fourth day, Beatrice was walking home alone from one of the neighboring farms. She was lost in painful thought and scarcely noticed where she was until she passed a clump of prominent trees which she knew was at the edge of Harding's place. Then she stopped and looked about her.

The sun had dipped, but an angry orange glow flushed the wide horizon and the sky overhead was a cold dark blue. The great sweep of grain caught the fading light, and Beatrice knew enough about farming to see how it had suffered. She could not look at it unmoved; the sight was pitiful. The wheat had cost long and patient labor, and she knew with what hope and ambition the man who had sown it had worked. It was only after years of strenuous toil, careful thought, and stern economy, that he had been able to break the broad belt of prairie, and in doing so he had boldly staked his all. Now it looked as if he had lost, and she was grieved to see so much effort thrown away.

Harding had transgressed, but the work he did was good, and Beatrice began to wonder how far that might atone for his lack of principle. Human character was mixed; men might be true in many ways, and

yet fall victims to a besetting sin. But it was a sin Beatrice could not forgive. Harding had sought the other woman while he professed his love for her. In Beatrice, pride, fastidiousness, and Puritanical convictions converged.

Letting her eyes travel farther along the grain, she started as she saw him. He had not noticed her, for he stood looking at his crop. His figure was outlined against the last of the light, and his pose was slack and stamped with dejection. It was obvious that he thought himself alone, for Harding was not the man to betray his troubles.

Beatrice's heart suddenly filled with pity. He must be very hard hit; and she believed that it was not the loss of fortune he felt most. Everything had gone against him. One could not refuse a man compassion because his sin had found him out.

To her surprise, she felt that she must speak to him. She did not know what she meant to say, but, half hesitating, she moved forward. Harding looked round at her step, and the fading glow struck upon his face.

It was brown and thin, and marked by a great physical weariness. The toil he had borne since the thaw came and the suspense he had suffered had set their stamp on him; he looked fined down, his face had an ascetic cast.

Beatrice caught her breath. By some strange inward power she grasped the truth. This man had done no wrong; there was no deceit in him. What she had believed of him was impossible! All that she had seen and heard condemned him; there was no weak point in the evidence of his guilt; but she trusted the prompting of her heart. Calm judgment and logical reasoning

had no place in this matter. She had wronged him. And how she must have hurt him!

She held out both her hands, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Craig," she said, "I've come back. I couldn't stay away."

Harding could not speak. He took her into his arms — and suddenly the earth seemed to be giving way under his feet; his brain reeled and a great blackness settled down over him.

"Why, you're ill!" Beatrice exclaimed. "Oh, I have brought you to this!"

The anguish in her cry cut through him as he was losing consciousness, and he pulled himself together.

"No," he smiled, "I'm not ill; but you must give me a moment to realize that I really have you again."

They walked back the few paces to the trail. An old log lay beside it, half buried in grass and wild flowers, and here they sat together, in the cool stillness of the dusk, until the darkness came down and hovered round them. Out of the early night sky, one star shone down on them, like a blessing.

For the time being, it was nothing to them that the prairie sod was cracked and parched, and that the destroying wind would rise again at dawn.

On the way back to the Grange, Beatrice brought up the subject which she felt must be talked of and then dropped for good.

"How dreadfully mistaken I was about — the girl!" she said, hesitatingly.

"How did you find it out?"

"I haven't really found out anything; I'm afraid I

can't explain. I suddenly saw the truth, and wondered why I had been blind."

"Do you mean ——"

"I mean that I should never have left you, Craig dear. I know that you never saw that girl before in your life — but I did not know it until I saw you standing there, in the wheat, this evening."

Harding dropped the hand he was holding, and caught her to him.

"Dear!" was all he said.

"Can you explain what happened in Winnipeg?" she asked as they walked on again.

"No; I'm puzzled. But, for your sake, I shall not rest until I've cleared myself." Then, with a sudden shock, he remembered the wheat they had left. "But I was forgetting — I may be a ruined man."

"And I the daughter of another," Beatrice answered with a smile. "That could make no difference, Craig; and we're not ruined yet. Still, because I was hard and unjust at first, I should like you to remember that I came to you when you were in trouble, and didn't ask whether you were innocent or not."

"I'll remember it," said Harding, "as long as I live."

When they reached the house, Mowbray and his wife were sitting on the veranda, and Lance came down the steps to meet them with his hand held out. Neither spoke, but Harding was touched by the sincerity of his welcome.

Beatrice ran up the steps to her mother, and Harding, after a word of greeting turned away. He felt that, until he had cleared himself, it would be more becoming in him to keep away from the Colonel and Mrs. Mowbray.

The next morning Mowbray called Beatrice into his study.

"I am glad that your confidence in Harding has returned," he said. "You must, however, understand that the situation is still awkward."

"Yes; Craig and I talked it over last night."

"You talked this matter over!" Mowbray exclaimed.

"Of course," said Beatrice calmly. "It's of some importance to me. Are you surprised?"

"I must admit that I am. When I was young, a well-brought-up girl would hardly have ventured to mention such subjects to her mother, much less discuss them with her lover."

Beatrice smiled at him.

"I'm afraid your feelings must get many a rude jar in these degenerate times. Still, you know things are changing."

"That's true," said Mowbray. "I've had cause to realize it of late. For example, your brother Lance goes off to Winnipeg on some mysterious business without consulting me, and only tells me in a casual manner that he may have to go again. Respect for parents is not a characteristic of your generation. But I want to speak about Harding."

He talked very kindly and shrewdly, and when Beatrice left him she sought her favorite place in the shadow of a nearby bluff to think over what he had said.

There was less wind for the next two days, and driving sand no longer raked the grain. From early morning dingy clouds rolled up slowly from the west, and though not a drop of rain fell the distance grew blurred. The horses on the range were restless and galloped furi-

ously now and then; the gophers scurried up and down the trails; men at work grew impatient over trifling obstacles, and often stopped to watch the clouds. These rolled on and vanished in the east, while many an anxious farmer wondered when the last would rise from the horizon and leave the pitiless sky uncovered again. Thirsty wild creatures stirred in the shadow of the bluffs and rustled through the withered grass beside the dried-up creeks. Leaves fluttered and hung still again with a strange limpness, their under sides exposed. It was as if the sun-scorched waste and all that lived on it were panting for the rain. And still the clouds that never broke rolled slowly on.

At dusk on the second evening, Beatrice and Harding walked across the prairie, speaking in low voices, anxious and yet serene.

"What are you thinking of, Craig?" Beatrice asked presently.

"Of the weather," Harding answered. "Wondering if these clouds will break or clear away again. It looks as if our future hung upon the chance of a storm. If it doesn't come, there's a long uphill fight before us; and I hate to think of what you may have to bear."

"I'm not afraid," said Beatrice. "If I stayed at Allenwood, I should not escape. Perhaps I have missed something by getting through life too easily. I really don't think I'm much weaker, or less capable, than Effie Broadwood, and she's not cast down."

Harding kissed the hand he held.

"A brave heart like yours carries one a long way, but training and experience are needed. Grit alone is not much use when you're up against a thing you don't know how to do."

"It helps you to learn. Am I so very stupid? Don't you see, dear, that I want to prove that I can be useful?"

"To carry heavy pails, bake, and mend old overalls? That would be an unthinkable waste of fine material. It's your business to be your beautiful and gracious self, a refining influence, a light in the home!"

Beatrice laughed.

"I'm afraid when you think about me you lose your usual sense. I should be as useful if I were made of painted wax, and you'd get tired of your goddess some day and want to break me up. I'm alive, you know. I want to be in the midst of the strife. I hear the bugles call."

Harding kissed her tenderly.

"I'm afraid we'll have to fall in with the firing line, but it will be my business to shield you from harm," he said.

"It's a good fight," she answered with sparkling eyes; "you have taught me that. The flag goes steadily forward with the pioneers in the van. There are great alkali barrens, rocks, and muskegs to be overcome, arid plains to be watered, forests cleared, the waste places to be made fruitful. That's why we have painted the Beaver of Industry in the field. But we have our camp-followers — and I might have been one — useless idlers, grafters, and dishonest contractors who rob the fighting men."

"When we've broken the wilderness, we'll have time to deal with them; but I'm afraid many a pioneer will go down before we march much farther."

"Ah!" said Beatrice softly. "But whether the

fight is hard or not, you must teach me to do my part."

She stopped, holding out her hands with an excited cry:

"The rain, Craig; the rain!"

Her hands felt wet, something drummed upon her broad straw hat, and the dust leaped up from the grass; then the quick patter ceased, and there was stillness again. It lasted for several minutes while both stood tense and still, scarcely venturing to hope. Then there was a roar in the distance and a puff of cool wind, and Harding, touching the girl's arm, hurried her forward.

"It's coming!" he said hoarsely. "Coming in earnest!"

"Oh, let's stay!" cried Beatrice. "I want to feel it's true!"

Harding laughed, but led her on, and presently they met the advancing rain. It beat, wonderfully refreshing, on their hot faces, and soon Beatrice's thin dress was soaked. Steam rose from the parched earth; there was a hothouse smell, a dull roar, and a rustle among the beaten grass, and the fading light was shut off by a curtain of falling water. Alternating between happy laughter and silence, during which their thankfulness became too deep for speech, they hurried toward Harding's farm, and Beatrice threw her arms round Hester's neck when she met her at the door.

"Oh!" she cried. "Our troubles are over! The rain! The rain!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE INHERITANCE

THE rain lasted several days and saved the crops: the wheat, although somewhat damaged, was ripening fast.

As Lance drove home from one of his mysterious absences from the Grange, he looked out over the rippling fields with a sense of thankfulness in his boyish heart. Harding was not to be ruined after all! The rain had saved his fortune; and in Lance's pocket there was a paper that would clear his name.

Beatrice met him on the steps, but he brushed past her with a smile and hurried to his father's study, where he knew he would find the Colonel.

"I've been away several times, and now I must tell you why, sir," he said. "You will remember that I've declared my belief in Harding all along."

"I've no doubt he feels properly grateful," Mowbray remarked.

"I'm grateful to him. And now I have some satisfaction in being able to prove his innocence. Read this."

He gave his father a note, and Mowbray read it aloud:

"'*I hereby declare that Craig Harding of Allenwood is a stranger to me. I met him for the first and*

only time at the Rideau Hotel, Winnipeg, and I regret that I then claimed his acquaintance.'"

"It sounds conclusive. I see it's signed 'Coral Stanton, clairvoyante.' May I ask how you came to meet this lady and get the document?"

"Both things needed some tact, sir," Lance answered with a grin.

"So I should imagine. Rather a delicate business for one so young. You must have seen that your motives were liable to be misunderstood."

Lance colored.

"I had to take the risk. As a matter of fact, things threatened to become embarrassing at first. However, I got the statement."

"What did you give for it?"

"A hundred dollars; what Miss Stanton was promised."

"Then she was hired to act a part? But what made her willing to betray her employers?"

"They deserved it," Lance answered in a curious tone. "It seems she got into difficulties with the police and had to leave the town; the clairvoyante business was only a blind, and somebody was robbed after gambling at her rooms. The men who made the plot took a shabby advantage of the situation."

"Do you know their names?"

"Yes," said Lance, hesitatingly. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather not mention them."

Mowbray looked at him keenly, and then made a sign of stern agreement.

"Perhaps that's best." He was silent for a few moments, grappling with this new pain that seared him to the heart. So Gerald had sunk to this! "Leave

the paper here, and send Beatrice to me," he said slowly.

Lance was glad to escape. He found Beatrice with her mother, and she and Mrs. Mowbray went at once to the Colonel's study.

"Your brother took some trouble to get this for you," Mowbray said, handing her the statement, which she read in silence.

"I will thank Lance; but this note really makes no difference," she declared.

"That's hard to understand."

"I had Craig's word. If I had doubted him, would I have believed this woman? But there's another matter I want to speak of. Craig didn't want me to, but he gave me permission."

Taking out the photographs Harding had shown her, she handed them to Mowbray. Mrs. Mowbray, looking over his shoulder, uttered an exclamation. The Colonel, too, was startled.

"That's Ash Garth, with Janet Harding on the steps! Where did you get them? What does it mean?"

Instead of answering, the girl glanced at her mother.

"I think it's quite plain," Mrs. Mowbray said. "Beatrice is engaged to Basil Harding's son."

"Why was I not told before?" Mowbray asked excitedly. "He's as well born as you are! Can't you see how it alters things?"

"Craig declares it makes no difference — and I'm beginning to agree with him."

"That's absurd!" Mowbray exclaimed. "False pride; mistaken sentiment! We know the advantage of springing from a good stock. Now I understand

why I sometimes felt a curious sympathy with Harding, even when I hated his opinions."

"You gave us no reason to suspect it," Beatrice answered with a smile. "Do you know his father's history?"

"Yes; but I don't know that I ought to tell it without his son's permission."

"Then we'll wait," said Beatrice. "Craig will be here soon."

Harding came in a few minutes afterward, and Mowbray, giving him a friendly greeting, handed him the letter Lance had brought, and the photographs.

"Your father was a comrade of mine," the Colonel said. "We were both stationed at an outpost in Northern India."

"Then you may be able to tell me something about his early life," replied Harding quietly. "It's a subject he never spoke of."

"I can do so. Are you willing that Beatrice and her mother should hear?"

"Yes; I don't wish to hide anything from them."

"Very well. Your father was an infantry captain and well thought of in his regiment. His worst faults were a quick temper and a rash impulsiveness, but he suffered for them. Before coming to India, he married beneath him, a girl of some beauty but no education. His relatives strongly opposed the match, and there was a quarrel with them.

"After a time Basil was ordered to a station where there was some European society and his wife was out of her element there. The other women of the post objected to her, and openly insulted her. Basil had

one quarrel after another on her behalf, and finally, after an unusually stormy scene with the artillery major, Basil sent in his papers.

"His relatives refused to receive him, they cut off his allowance; but he clung to his wife until she died a couple years later. Then he came to Canada and vanished.

"His mother died; and one by one the others followed — all except Basil Morel, his mother's brother."

"Ah!" Beatrice interrupted.

The Colonel glanced at her a moment, and then went on:

"Morel had a very strong affection for Basil —he was his namesake and only nephew. Feeling that they had been too hard on him, Morel traced Basil in Canada, wrote him a long letter, and enclosed a draft for a thousand pounds, as part of back allowances. Basil wrote a brief and bitter note in answer, then deposited the money in a Winnipeg bank, to be given to his son after his death, on condition that the son never question where it came from. This son was by the second wife; there were no children by the first.

"Well, Basil died; the bank reported to Morel that the money had been paid to the son; and then — the old man, living alone at Ash Garth, was getting very lonely; he had time to brood over the injustice done Basil, and, before he died, he wanted to make it up to Basil's son. But the son had completely disappeared. He had left Dakota and gone to Manitoba; from there all trace of him had vanished. Morel is now a broken old man; but, because Basil and I were comrades, he confides many things to me, and I know that deep down

in his heart there is still a hope that he will live long enough to find Basil's son."

The Colonel's voice was husky, and he paused a moment before he said:

"With your permission, Mr. Harding, I should like to send him a cable."

Harding nodded assent.

Beatrice was crying softly.

"Now I understand why Mr. Morel always looked so sad when I talked of the prairie," she said brokenly. "Mother, you must have known!" she added as an afterthought.

"Yes, but I didn't feel that it was my secret, dear," Mrs. Mowbray answered gently.

At the Colonel's request, Harding told them of his early life; and then he and Beatrice drove across the prairie to tell the story to Hester. Beatrice felt that it was the girl's right to know.

Harvest came, and although the crop was lighter than he had hoped, Harding saw that he would have a satisfactory margin. It was not so with most of his neighbors, and when the strain of forced effort slackened, and the smoke of the thrasher no longer streaked the stubble, there were anxious hearts at Allenwood. Even the buoyant courage of the younger men began to sink; hitherto they had carelessly borne their private troubles, but now they felt that the settlement was in danger. Those who had never taken thought before asked what must be done, and nobody could tell them. Harding and his friends had a surprise to spring on their neighbors, and on Davies as well, but they waited until the time was ripe.

Then one evening Mowbray rode over to Kenwyne's homestead.

"You and Broadwood have opposed me, but I have never doubted your sincerity," he said. "In fact, since Brand has gone, I feel I'd rather trust you and Harding than the boys who have given me their thoughtless support. We are threatened with grave trouble."

"We must try to justify your belief in us, sir," said Kenwyne. "What is the trouble?"

"Carlyon, Webster, and Shepstone came to me, and confessed that they have mortgaged their farms. To make things worse, I have a letter from the man in Winnipeg they borrowed from, informing me that he would seize Gerald's land unless a large sum is paid. You must see that this means disaster to Allenwood."

Mowbray looked harassed and worn, and Kenwyne felt sorry for him.

"I suggest that you let the fellow produce his mortgages and receive him at a council meeting. The matter's of interest to everybody."

"Then you have some scheme?" Mowbray asked eagerly.

"As it's far-reaching, we'd rather put it before the council. I'm half afraid we can't expect your approval until you know everything; but you should be able to command a majority if we don't convince you."

"I can do nothing to save the settlement," Mowbray said with dignity; "and I dare not refuse to let others try, even if their ways are not mine. We'll leave it at that. I'll call the meeting."

It was a calm, clear evening when all the Allenwood settlers assembled in the hall at the Grange. The days were getting shorter, and a lamp or two was lighted;

but, outside, the last of the sunset glowed in a red band along the prairie's rim. Mowbray sat at the head of the table; Harding, Broadwood, Kenwyne, and Lance were close together; the rest scattered about the spacious room, some half hidden in the shadow, some where the partial illumination touched them. All were silent and expectant; they felt it would prove a memorable night for Allenwood.

There was a rattle of wheels outside, and soon afterward Davies was shown in. He was smartly dressed in well-cut city clothes, and his aggressive, self-conscious air contrasted with the easy grace of the brown-faced men in shooting jackets and fringed deerskin.

"I came here expecting a private interview," he said to Mowbray. "I do not understand why I'm asked to meet these gentlemen, most of whom I have not the pleasure of knowing."

"I cannot tell what you expected," Mowbray answered haughtily. "Your business is, however, of interest to us all, and to state it now will save some time, because nothing can be done until our council is informed of it."

Davies' glance wandered round the room, as if in search of somebody, but he did not notice Harding, who was in the shadow.

"Very well," he said, undoing a bundle of documents. "I hold mortgages on land and property belonging to Gerald Mowbray, Carlyon, Webster, and Shepstone." He read out particulars of the sums lent and interest due, and then put the papers on the table. "You are at liberty to examine them."

Carlyon turned to Mowbray, with a flushed face.

"They can't be contested, sir. Speaking for the

others, as well as myself, I must say that we feel our position, and are very sorry that we have brought this trouble upon you and our friends."

Harding moved forward and picked up the mortgages, and Davies showed his surprise. After examining the documents carefully, Harding passed them to Broadwood, who looked over them in a silence that was accentuated by the rattle of a loose blind as puffs of wind swept into the room.

"All right," Broadwood said, and handed a sheet of paper to each of the debtors.

"Will you agree to these terms? Yes or no?" he asked.

One of the young men laughed hoarsely, as if from unexpected relief; another made a glad sign of assent; and Carlyon's eyes were bright as he turned to Broadwood.

"Agree?" he exclaimed. "We never hoped for such a chance as this!"

Broadwood put one of the papers in front of Mowbray.

"They consent, sir. We'd like your sanction."

"I cannot give it unreservedly. But as I cannot suggest anything better, I must not refuse." Mowbray addressed Davies. "As the farms were mortgaged against the provisions of our settlement covenant, I believe your claim might be disputed, but I won't urge that point. The money was borrowed and must be paid."

"With your permission, sir!" Harding took the big inkstand and placed it before Davies. "Write a formal discharge for these debts, and I'll give you a check."

Davies' face was hot with baffled fury, but he asked in a sneering tone:

"Will the bank make it good?"

"Here's their letter," said Harding dryly.

Davies glanced at the letter, and threw it down. Then he pulled himself together.

"It seems," he said to Mowbray, "that you have made some arrangement to finance these gentlemen, and they have agreed; but Mr. Gerald Mowbray owes a much larger sum, and I have his word that he is unable to pay. He left the matter in my hands, and before going any further I should like to suggest that we might arrive at some understanding ——"

Mowbray cut him short.

"We can make no terms with you, if that is what is meant. My son owes you money; you must take what you are entitled to."

"But the debt is his. He must decide."

"He has decided," Harding said quietly. "Here's a telegram from him, answering a letter of mine which he probably got after you left. He agrees to transfer the mortgaged property to his father and another, on terms that don't concern you. Read it."

"Ah!" cried Davies, hoarse with anger. "Mowbray has gone back on me. I was a fool to trust him!"

Colonel Mowbray flushed, but did not answer, and Harding turned to Davies.

"This has nothing to do with our business. Write your receipts, including Gerald Mowbray's debt, and take your money."

Davies did so, and carefully examined the check Harding gave him. Then he got up and made Mow-

bray an ironical bow. One of the men opened the door, and he went out surlily.

There was a general movement and a murmur throughout the room, expressing relief and a slackening of tension.

"It's a satisfaction to see the last of the fellow," one man said, voicing the feelings of all. "The settlement has escaped a danger; but we must be careful not to let it fall into another. May I inquire about the agreement which Mr. Harding has made with our friends?"

Harding explained that they were to farm their land under his instructions, paying a moderate rate of interest. A fixed sum was to be set aside every year to redeem the loan, so that in time the debtors would again acquire possession, and any surplus would belong to them.

"Mr. Harding's position is now very strong," the man contended. "He can, if he wishes, dictate to the rest of us, and I think we ought to know his plans and how he expects to profit."

There was deep silence when Harding got upon his feet and glanced round the room. A few of the men were obviously suspicious, and one or two hostile, but some looked willing to give him fair play and some quietly confident in him.

"To begin with, I expect no direct profit from Allenwood," he said. "The advantage I shall gain will be the keeping down of my working expenses by your cooperation. With better trails we'll need fewer teams to bring out supplies and haul in our grain; and we can avoid using two half-empty wagons when one will take both loads. We can buy and sell on joint

lines, saving all round, and can use the latest and biggest machines. Singly, we cannot afford them; combined, we can buy and, what is more, keep the implements employed. But we can work out details later. You have reached a turning-point to-night. Those of you with private means, if there are any such, may continue to farm as a pastime, but for the man who must live by his farming, it is serious work. There is a time of low prices before us that will weed out the slack; but with care and effort we can hold out until the flood of prosperity which is coming sweeps our difficulties away. We must perfect our methods, fall in with modern practise, and study economy. That I have now some power here is true; I ask your help, and value it, but if needful I can do without it. I and several more are going on, working together on the best plan we can find, as we have begun."

A murmur of applause greeted the close of the speech, for Harding's blunt candor had gained him the respect of his antagonists and strengthened the loyalty of his friends.

Then Mowbray leaned forward, holding up his hand.

"We have heard Mr. Harding's intentions declared with the straightforwardness one expects from him; and it must be clear to all that he has freed Allenwood from a peril." He paused, and his voice was strained as he resumed: "For a while we prospered here, and I like to think I led you well; but the times began to change without our recognizing it. I cannot change, but you must, for you are young; the future lies before you. I am old, and I feel my age to-night. The bur-

den of rule gets heavy; I want to lay it down. You must choose another leader who understands these times, and I think you see where a wise choice lies."

For a moment nobody spoke, and then a unanimous cry of protest broke out. It rang with feeling, and when it died away man after man urged Mowbray to keep control.

He listened with a faint smile.

"I am honored by this mark of confidence," he said quietly. "But if I consent, you must give me the helper I need, and you must follow him with the loyalty you have always shown me. To some extent we shall counterbalance extremes in each other, which may be for the good of all, because I have much to learn from the present, and my helper something from the past. I could not ask you to obey an outsider, but the man I choose will soon become a member of my family. I nominate Mr. Harding, who has saved the settlement."

There were cries of agreement that swelled into a storm of satisfaction, and Harding said a few words in a voice that shook. This was a turn of affairs he had not expected, and he was moved by Mowbray's confidence and the number of friends he had made.

Then the council broke up, and when the last had gone Mowbray joined his wife on the veranda, where he sat looking with tired eyes toward the pale red glow on the skyline left by the setting sun. The prairie was formless and shadowy, but darkness had not quite closed in.

"I feel that all this is symbolical, my dear," he said. "My day is over, but the night has not yet come.

Though it will not be by the way I would have chosen, I may still see Allenwood safe and prosperous."

Mrs. Mowbray took his hand caressingly.

"You have led the boys well, and taught them much; they will not forget it. You never shrank from a sacrifice that was for their good — and I know the cost of the one you have made to-night."

"I knew I could trust to your sympathy; you haven't failed me yet," he said gently. "I wonder why Gerald broke away from the rascal at last. I may be wrong, but I'd like to believe that when the time came he found he could not betray his friends; that his heart spoke, and a trace of the honor we tried to teach him awoke to life."

"I think you're right," Mrs. Mowbray answered. "I am sure there is hope for him."

Then she turned and her eyes rested on the dark figures of Beatrice and Harding, who had left the house and were walking slowly across the plain. Moving side by side, with love and confidence in their hearts, they looked toward the east, where the dawn would rise.

THE END

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